

Unsure where the wind blows

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/43229109) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/43229109>.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	The Walking Dead (TV)
Relationship:	Daryl Dixon/Beth Greene
Characters:	Daryl Dixon , Beth Greene (Walking Dead) , Merle Dixon , Judith Grimes , Rick Grimes , Carl Grimes , Carol Peletier , Maggie Greene , Glenn Rhee , Tyreese Williams , Sasha Williams (Walking Dead) , Bob Stookey , Michonne (Walking Dead) , Abraham Ford , Rosita Espinosa , Tara Chambler , Eugene Porter
Language:	English
Series:	Part 3 of Wild Days
Stats:	Published: 2022-11-23 Completed: 2025-05-26 Words: 32,807 Chapters: 30/30

Unsure where the wind blows

by [KatePryde](#)

Summary

Their little bit of happy burned straight to the ground. Where do they run to? Where can they go with their family scattered to the winds? There's a baby on her back and her crossbow leading lover in front of her, and Beth will follow him to the ends of the earth.

My serious little AU brainfart of a NaNoWriMo project that has somehow evolved into a multiple part series. I will never forgive TWD for killing off Merle Dixon and Beth Greene just when they were getting interesting.

Chapter 1

Beth gets woken up by the baby fussing. She pulls Judith closer to her, already knowing that the sound will more than likely draw the walkers to them. The fire they built last night has faded down to embers. Daryl is sitting next to it, leaning against a tree with his crossbow laid across his knees.

"Did you get any sleep last night."

"Nah," he mumbles, "Kept watch." He stands up suddenly, "Gotta get moving."

They cover the remaining fire with dirt and turn their backs to the smoke cloud in the sky. Beth knows it can only be the prison. They walk this time, Judith cooing from her place on Beth's back. It takes about an hour or so when they finally emerge from the trees. They hear the firmilar noises and moaning and chewing, looking left to see three or four walkers feating on some bodies.

"Stay back," Daryl murmurs.

She watches as he kills the walkers quickly, pulling out all of his bolts when he's done. They can't afford to lose the bolts. Beth stands behind him quietly, slipping the arms out of the backpack straps and turning Judith around so that she's laying on Beth's front instead of her back. Beth clutches the baby to her tightly as she steps slowly around the carnage. The bodies are beyond recognition, the walkers looking too dead to be any of their people and the bodies have been eaten away until there's no telling who is who. Beth sees the child's shoe just as she comes up beside Daryl. Her whole body tenses up and she clutches Judith even tighter.

They're following a path beaten into the dirt. Beth watches as Daryl looks closely at the ground, trying to see if anyone got away from this carnage.

For some reason, she flashes back to when they lost Zach.

"I don't cry any more, Daryl."

Well that was a fucking lie. She turns around to glance over her shoulder and even with all of the trees in between she can still see the smoke rising from the ruins of what had once been her home. Tears start cutting lines down her cheeks. She's not being loud about it, Judith fusses enough for that. But as they're walking she's crying for any number of things.

She thought she could be stronger than this.

She thought she was ready for something like this.

But nothing ever makes you ready to lose practically everything and everyone you've ever known, loved, cared about.

And for Beth this isn't the first time.

It's harsh reminder that the good times never last in this world.

Are they really the only ones left? Did no one else survive? Daddy was gone, that was certain. And now there was a different kind of blood staining Beth's hands. Anger had burned through her, steadied her hand once she saw her father fall. With the scope and the range of the rifle it had been easy, so, so easy to blow the Governor away.

Maybe she should feel bad about taking a kill that others had claimed, taking away the opportunity for Rick or Michonne to finish the job instead. But she doesn't. If anyone owed anything to her, that man owed her his life as penance for killing her Daddy. She had taken her revenge. But this, this wondering, this not knowing?

This might just be the thing that finally kills her.

Was she stupid for having hope? For thinking that everyone she loved was alright, that they got out? She feels like she is. Who was she kidding? There was no way anybody survived that carnage. The three of them are all that's left in Beth Greene's little world.

That thought is nearly enough to send Beth to her knees. She would have hit the ground hard if Daryl hadn't caught her just before the impact.

"Hey," he says to her softly, "We've gotta keep moving."

He's right. Beth doesn't really care what happens to her, but they've got Judith and pretty soon she's gonna need more than what they can scavenge for and Beth's supply won't be enough to keep her full. The baby is growing, walking, and Beth can already tell that she's fed up from being in the carrier.

She's got her fist in her mouth, slobbering all over it with an angry expression in her eyes. Beth runs a hand soothingly over her short little peach-fuzz hair and hums to her through the tears.

Daryl curls his arm around her shoulder and she lets herself tuck her head into his chest as they kneel in the dirt. She feels weak as a newborn kitten and laying here in the dirt is more than a little appealing.

Judith.

Beth forces herself to her feet.

Daryl turns her around to face him, and searches her face for some sign that she's gonna be okay. Beth doesn't know what he reads in her expression, but he presses a kiss to her forehead and grabs her by the hand.

"Come on."

Beth sees a flash of red in all the green. Berries. Daryl's looking at some tracks on the ground while she examines the fruit, trying to tell if it's poisoned or not.

"They picked up the pace," Daryl says quietly, "Looks like it might've gone bad."

"Wouldn't kill ya to have a little faith," Beth snaps back at him.

But who is she kidding? Beth's faith is long gone. She avoids looking at him, reaching to grab the berries off of the bush.

"And what's faith done for us, huh?" The anger in Daryl's voice is quiet, "Sure 's hell didn' do shit fer yer daddy."

Beth whirls back around to stare at him with a tear streaked face. There's a catch in her breath that she knows he can hear. He meets her gaze shame-faced, like he knew it was gonna rip her apart but he still said it anyway. She takes a moment to look at him, at his hard lines and hair matted down with sweat and blood. He's covered in scrapes from the underbrush but he still looks like someone who is gonna make it in this world.

She knows that she doesn't paint the same picture.

Beth turns back around and starts pulling the berries off the bush again with a greater sense of urgency. Something taps her on the shoulder, and there's Daryl handing her his bandana to wrap the food in. He's got an apologetic look on his face. They start moving again, until Beth hears a twig snap.

Daryl hears it to, she sees him tense as she pulls the knife out of her holster, her other hand going protectively around Judith. Then it's got her by the shoulders, shoving her left and right as it tries to find a clear spot to bite. Beth lets out a small scream and curls herself down over Judith. The baby is crying, screaming, grabbing Beth with her tiny fists.

Not the baby.

Goddammit not the baby.

She can see Daryl trying to get a clear shot, his feet dancing around as he tries to find an opening. He can't. Tossing the crossbow to the ground, he yanks the walker away from her and Judith. Beth had dropped her knife when she got grabbed, and he nods to it as he rolls himself down onto the ground, pulling the walker on top of him with its front facing Beth. She angles herself so Judith doesn't get grabbed or hit and stabs cleanly into the creature's head.

Daryl doesn't even look at her when he stands up, just reaches for his crossbow once he's on his feet.

"Come on."

She's got no choice but to follow.

Chapter 2

As much noise as Judith makes, they know that any kind of talking is dangerous.

And honestly?

Beth has nothing to say.

She's still smarting from the dumbass comment Daryl made about her daddy. She knows that him offering her his bandana was his way of trying to apologize, but dammit, she wants an actual apology. With words.

That's not too much to ask for, is it?

Judith is restless, but they can't let her out of the carrier for long. There's too much around them, too many bushes that who knows what might crawl out of, and Beth spends every waking moment filled with anxiety like she's never felt before. Judith has never been outside of the fences, and even though she's just learned to walk in to past month or so she doesn't understand that she can't just run off somewhere. She's one now, or thereabouts, and it seems as if she's learning how to be quiet but she's not quiet all the time.

Beth makes Daryl be the one to sleep that night. Hands him the baby and lets him curl around them both while she sits up with the rifle in her lap.

It scares her how quickly she's already gotten used to the quiet. But that is the way that you survive in this world, adapting, and quickly.

They've found a little clearing in the woods. Rigged a few trip lines with some braided vines because they don't have anything else. Daryl finds an old tarp and some other junk in an abandoned car and they set up a little tent. It's easy this time to slip back into the people they were when the farm fell. Daryl goes to find some food while Beth builds a fire and uses some of the junk to rig warning signals. Judith sits on a pile of rags with some non-sharp pieces of metal to play with while Beth tries to gather some water off if the plants nearby.

Daryl comes back with a snake and one less bolt for his crossbow and her heart sinks a little. They didn't have many bullets and if he lost more bolts they would only have their knives. They needed to have more than their knives. Beth watches as he cleans the snake a couple of yards from their camp. She cringes a little at the thought of eating it but reminds herself that she's eaten worse.

He still hasn't said anything to her.

Judith climbs into Beth's lap and Beth spits out the food in her mouth, rolling it between her fingers to make sure that it's not too tough for baby gums before offering it to the little thing. Judith makes a face when she sticks it in her mouth, but she doesn't spit it out and Beth counts that as a victory.

"Gotta get her more used to food."

Daryl only grunts in response.

She's pissed all of a sudden, as Judith pulls her shirt to the side and latches on without even asking. She's pissed and ticked off and sad and everything in between. Daryl won't talk to her, she's not enough to keep Judith safe, and goddammit it she needs something to take the edge of her anger off before she explodes.

"I need a drink."

Daryl tosses the water bottle over to her and she turns it around in her hands. She winces as Judith bites her and wonders if this is what Daryl sees her as. Is she really nothing but a child?

"A real drink," she clarifies, "Alcohol. Never had it before."

Those sips of the prison hooch Glenn had tried to make don't count.

Daryl doesn't answer her, just keeps chewing on his part of the snake, and it makes the anger bubble inside of her just a little bit more. Fine. She could go there.

"Daddy never wanted us to drink. But he's not exactly around any more, is he?"

Daryl still doesn't say anything.

"I though maybe we could go find some."

Silence.

She pulls Judith off of her and practically throws the baby at Daryl.

"Fine. Enjoy yer snake jerky."

Beth pulls her knife out of the dirt and strides off.

Chapter 3

She doesn't pay attention to where she's walking, doesn't look back. She's too angry, got a haze over her eyes that won't go away.

Why won't he just talk to her?

Beth's not sure how long she walks, just knows it's long enough that she can't smell the cooked snake anymore. Or hear Judith crying. That had pulled at her heartstrings, but she had kept on. She doesn't know what else to do.

A group of walkers comes out of the trees, and Beth presses her back to one when she realizes how many there are (four or five) and how closely grouped they are. It's too many to take on all at once, so she reaches down and tosses a rock. Her distraction works, mostly. All but one follow the sound of the fallen stone, and she's able to skirt around the tree to stab the last one in the head quietly. A twig snaps and she whirls. It's Daryl, crossbow in one hand and baby in the other.

He just looks at her with an unreadable expression before striding off.

Beth thinks he's taking her somewhere to find what she wants, but once her knees hit one of the tripwires and he sets Judith down next to their makeshift tent she realizes that he just brought her back.

"I'm not stayin' in this suck-ass camp."

She flips him off and turns around, but he yanks her back up against his chest. His breath is hot on her neck.

Say sorry.

Please.

Say sorry and tell me we're gonna be okay.

He doesn't.

"You've had yer fun."

She stomps on his foot and slides forward when he releases her.

"Do you feel anythin'?" she wants to know.

He's still so quiet.

But this time he follows her after he makes her help him pack up. She shoulders Judith and tosses her ponytail back so that the baby has something to play with while they walk. They

find a country club, find some warmer clothes to guard against the cold, find a bottle of peach schnapps.

Beth cries when she tries to drink it.

Daryl seems fed up with it all, smashes it against the floor, tells her that he's not gonna let her first real drink be of some damn peach schnapps.

It takes them nearly all day to reach the shack.

Judith's asleep, and he pulls some bottles out of a crate, tosses all of the rags they have into it, and lays the baby down gently, stroking her hair. Judith stirs a little but stays asleep.

Beth sits down while Daryl pours her a glass of...something.

"There," he tells her, "That's a real first drink."

Chapter 4

The alcohol was a bad idea.

It's only been two or three days since they lost the prison but this was probably the worst idea Beth Greene had ever had. Tossing back a few shots of moonshine, playing 'I never' just to get him to say something to her.

He hasn't been this closed off to her in months and it hurts nearly as much as losing her daddy hurts.

She doesn't know what to do with it.

The anger had bubbled up, exploded out of her, consumed her until it just vanishes, just like that.

"Daddy always said that bad moonshine could make you go blind."

"Nothin' worth seein' out there anymore."

That should have been her first sign.

The second sign should've been when he started fixing up the windows and she found that dumbass pink bra planter.

She snorts, "Who'd go into a store and walk out with somethin' like this?"

"My dad, that's who."

She means to be quiet, to not say a word. She knows Daryl's dad was nothing more than a piece of shit but this is the first time Daryl has really said something about his dad that has nothing to do with the scars on his back. But then Daryl tells her his dad used things like that for target practice inside and the words just burst out of her,

"Yer dad shot things inside the house?"

"Yeah."

He points out a bunch of things around them, uses it as an explanation as to why he knew this was a shine shack, and her heart breaks a little as she figures out this is what his childhood was like. Judith squirms a little in her box and Beth reaches over to stroke her back until she settles. There's a walker outside, but he's nailed the door and the windows shut and they're safe enough inside so he settles down next to her and she convinces him to play 'I never'.

"I never need a game ta get lit afore."

That pisses her off.

"I've never shot a cross bow."

"I've never been outta Georgia."

"I've never been drunk and did somethin' stupid."

"I've never been on vacation."

"I've never been in jail, I mean, as a prisoner."

She had meant the drunk tank, but that was the wrong thing to say and she should've known it the minute he tensed up and his expression changed. His hand's up by his forehead, playing with his hair and he's looking at her with nothing in his eyes.

"That's what ya think o' me?"

She's fucked it all up. She knows she has, because the little bit of heartbreak in his voice cuts her down to the core. But whatever ball she wanted rolling, it was heading down the hill at breakneck speed and she couldn't stop it. She tried to backtrack, to explain herself, but it's too late.

"Drink up."

She remembers the game Zach used to play all those months ago, in the months when it was her and Zach and not her and Daryl. She'd do anything to try to divert his attention right now.

"Prison guard. You were a prison guard before the turn."

The way he tenses up tells her she didn't fix it, just made it worse.

"No."

"It's your turn."

"Imma take a piss."

He drops the glass while walking away from her and undoing his belt.

"Daryl, the baby!"

"Said I was takin' a piss!"

"Well don't talk so loud."

"What, you my chaperone?" His expression changes, and it's the closest she's ever seen it to looking hard and mean.

Was this what his daddy looked like?

Beth cusses at herself for thinking like that.

"Oh wait, my turn."

"I've never eaten frozen yogurt."

"I've never had a pet pony."

"Never got nothin' from Santa Clause."

"Never relied on anyone for protection before."

"Daryl-"

"Never sung out in front o' a big group in public, like everything was fun, like everything was a big game."

He looks down his nose at her. "Sure as hell never cut my wrist for attention."

There's a walker outside, and Daryl grabs his crossbow and drags her out by the wrist, kicking the door shut behind them. He toys with the thing, plays with it, shooting it wherever he wants to before she finally puts the damn thing out of its misery.

Her wrist is smarting from where he had pulled her. She can hear Judith crying inside. The moonshine has brought something up inside the both of them and it has to come out now. She spits out everything she's thought in the past few days.

"I know you look at me and you just see another dead girl. I'm not Michonne. I'm not Carol. I'm not Maggie. I've survived and you don't get it 'cause I'm not like you or them. But I made it and you don't get to treat me like crap just because you're afraid."

He puts his face right up to hers, leaning down to her level. "I ain't afraid of nothin'."

He wants to bring up her wrist? Fine. They can have it all out right here.

"I remember. When that little girl came outta the barn. After my mom. You were like me, then. And now god forbid you let anyone get too close, let anyone care about you?"

"Too close, huh? I've had my dick inside you Beth, how's that for too close? You outta know all about that! Lost two other boyfriends, didn't even shed a tear. Won't shed a tear when I'm gone, when we're done, am'i'right? Whole family gone, all ya can do is go lookin' for some hooch like a dumb college bitch!"

"Screw you!"

He laughs, a biting sound, "In case ya forgot, ya already did. And everyone we know is dead. Ain't ever gonna see them again."

Judith is crying, but they have to finish this. His face screws up then, fills with anger and regret and sadness and despair and -

"The Governor rolled right up to our gates. Maybe if I wouldn't have stopped looking. Maybe 'cause I gave up. That's on me."

Beth tries to touch him, but he jerks back.

"Yer daddy, baby. Maybe I could've done somethin'."

She's seen a lot of things in this world, but she's never seen Daryl Dixon cry. She grabs him around the middle, presses herself to his back. He sinks down to the ground and it's all she can do to keep her grip on him.

Beth's never gonna drink again.

Chapter 5

Daryl turns himself in her arms when he's done, presses a kiss to her cheek.

"M'sorry," he mumbles, not knowing what else to say.

He tries to meet her gaze but she won't even look at his eyes anymore and he cusses himself for that. Looking at Beth, she seems smaller somehow, closed in on herself like a scared little bird. He did that.

He did that.

Judith is crying inside and if they let it go on much longer they'll have some visitors they don't want. Beth vanishes inside, and he can hear her soothing the baby, hears the shift in the floor that tells him she's pacing, rocking back and forth. He goes back inside long enough to get his crossbow.

"Gonna go get some food," he tells her.

She just nods in response from her position on the moth eaten couch, Judith cradled to her breast.

"Not gonna go far," he adds.

She nods again. There's a glassy look in her eyes and he's not sure if it's from the booze or the tears. He's an angry at himself for it, the type of anger that tries to burn a hole through the chest.

"I'll be back."

He doesn't go far, it doesn't take him long to find a couple of squirrels. He goes back quickly, can hear Beth cleaning up some spots inside. He digs a whole, builds a fire, cooks the squirrel as quickly as he can. Daryl Dixon isn't a man who uses words very often, but his actions often speak for themselves. By the time he finished cooking, covers the fire and walks into the house with the food held in front of him. It's his apology. Judith is playing with some junk in the corner, and Beth has cleared most of the floor so that she doesn't put anything in her little curious mouth. Looks like Beth has found some stale, expired crackers and a couple of bottles of water in the trash surrounding the shine shack.

Daryl hands Beth her share of the food and goes to work cutting tiny pieces up for Judith. Beth hands the baby a cracker to munch on while she waits. Beth looks up at him as she takes the first bite and sees him watching her.

"If you're gonna say something, say it."

Daryl puts the little pile of finely chopped meat on one of the cleaner books and sets it in front of Judith. He doesn't say anything, just reaches for Beth and gently takes her by the

wrist when she doesn't pull away. He pushes up the sleeve and stares down at the little curve of raised skin slicing up towards her wrist. It doesn't go left to right, but up and down, starting about two inches below her wrist and stopping just short of her palm. Daryl leans down to press a gentle kiss to her skin, holding her arm firmly when she tries to pull away. He only looks up when Beth let's out a sharp sob and pulls her directly into his lap when he sees the tears tracking lines down her skin.

"M'sorry," he whispers into her hair as she buries her face in his chest, "Didn' mean it."

"You did," she chokes out, and they both know it's sort of true.

People say stupid shit like that when they're hurt or in pain.

He holds on to her until she's all cried out, and it's long enough that Judith takes a few shaky steps towards them until she practically falls into Beth's lap. Daryl watches as she reaches her chubby little baby hands to Beth's face and pats her cheek.

"Mama?"

Chapter 6

"I didn't teach her that." Beth is quick to say. "I've been showing her that picture of Lori, and tellin' her all I can remember."

"Nah, Beth, it's not yer fault. Tell her about Lori all ya want, but yer the Mama she knows."

Beth cradles the baby to her and tries so hard not to think of everything they've lost in the past few days. It's hard. No, it's impossible. It wasn't supposed to be this way. They were supposed to be safe, supposed to be okay, supposed to be able to live and die and maybe be happy, safe inside of the fences.

"We'll find them," Daryl says suddenly, interrupting her thoughts, "We'll find them."

Beth thinks back to the train tracks, to the child's shoe laying on the ground and the carnage laying around it. "You don't know that."

"Nah," Daryl agrees, "I don't. But yer the one who said to have a little faith, Lil' Girl. We'll find them, as many of them as we can, and we'll tell them all about Judith's first word."

Beth can live with that.

They spend the next few hours settling down, boarding up the windows and rigging some lines in front of the doors. This place is drafty, full of holes in the walls and busted windows, but it's better than nothing and it will keep them safe tonight. There's a well, looks like, and the house is connected to it so there's plenty of fresh water (something Daryl practically pours down her throat while warning her about a hangover from the quart of moonshine she's sucked down). There's not much worth scavenging, except a backpack and some empty bottles with lids.

They can't stay here permanently. But they can stay here tonight.

There's some blankets that aren't completely covered with holes, and Beth uses those to make a bed in one of the cleaner corners. Daryl doesn't try to apologize to her again, and Beth knows him well enough that the food and the few mumbled words he was able to get out are as much of an apology as she's ever gonna get from him. It's enough, really it is, but she needs a few more moments to stop smarting from the feeling his harsh words had given her. Letting him know she's not mad doesn't come with words, though, but from the two full cigarette packs she had found while making them a place to sleep.

He gives her that little crooked smile of his that rarely lights up his face, and she knows they're gonna be okay.

As okay as they can be anyway.

Daryl goes outside to where he's smoking away from the baby, and Beth waits until Judith is asleep again to go join him out on the porch. She sits down across from him and stretches her

legs out, making sure that their feet don't touch. Apologies or not, she still feels a little bit awkward.

"Wish we could've buried him..." Daryl says lowly, voice trailing off as he stares into the distance.

Beth is confused, "Who?"

"Yer daddy."

"Oh."

There's a million different things wrapped up in that 'Oh.' Regret. Sorrow. Despair. Loss. Knowing that maybe, just maybe she was the only one in the world left alive that was connected to the blood of Hershel Greene. That a man who just wanted to grow old and die in peace (after retirement and a few grandchildren) with his family by his side was instead cursed to live in a literal hell on earth and lose practically everyone he had ever known and loved. As sad as she is, though, the booze still in her belly is making her feel warm and carefree. If you asked her right here and now if she was okay with dying, she would've said yes because all her feelings were muddled and she couldn't tell them apart.

"I get why he quit drinking." She leans back against the porch with a sigh.

Daryl looks a little concerned, "Ya feel sick?"

"Nah," Beth shakes her head, "That's the problem. I feel good. I feel free. Not a care or a damn in the world." She winces, "I know that's bad."

"Yer lucky yer a happy drunk."

Beth shakes her head again, "I wouldn't call it that, but okay." She smirks at him slightly, "Least I'm not a jerk when I drink."

Daryl can't help but chuckle ruefully, "Yeah, M'a dick when I'm drunk." He stabs his knife into the post in front of him and reaches out his foot so that their legs are touching. Beth presses hers up against his and he looks up at her under his eyes.

Forgiveness.

"Tell me a story?" Beth asks.

"What kind of story?"

"Anything."

Daryl looks thoughtful for a minute, "Merle had a dealer. Janky little white guy, tweaker. One day we were over at his house, watchin' tv. Wasn't even noon, were all wasted. Merle was high. Watchin' some show, Merle started talkin' some shit about it. Bein' dumb. Turns out, was the tweaker's kids favorite show. Dude never saw his kids, felt guilty or something. He

punches Merle, I punch him, he pulls a gun on us, Merle pulls his gun on him. Everyone's yellin'. Thought I was gonna fuckin' die over some cartoon about a damn talkin' dog."

He trails off, but Beth has to know the ending. "How'd the two of you get out of it?"

"Took a fist to the gut and puked everywhere. Merle and the tweaker laughed, and that was that." He looks her dead in the eyes, "You wanna know where I was, 'fore all this? 'Fore you? Driftin' around with Merle, doing whatever he said we was gonna do. Jus' some redneck asshole with an even bigger asshole fer a brother. Didn't mean nothin' to nobody, nobody but Merle and when he was on the shit I didn't mean much to him either."

Beth scoots forward and leans into him, taking his hands in hers. "I miss him too." He spreads his legs, opens his arms, and she tucks herself into him, under his chin. "Miss them all, Maggie, Shawn, Mama, Daddy. Miss Maggie bossin' me, Shawn too. And Daddy.....well...I wanted more for him. Didn't want him to go out like that, wanted it to be peaceful. Quiet. Maggie and Glenn would have a baby, he'd get to be a grandpa, and we'd get to have normal shit, and he would be old. And that would be that."

She lets out a wet laugh. "That's how unbelievably stupid I am."

"Yer not stupid, Lil' Girl."

"Nah, but I'm different. I'm not made like other people, I let myself be hopeful even though it's nothin' but heartbreak."

"Ya gotta put that away, Beth, or it's gonna kill you." He lifts his hand to press it against her chest, "It kills you in here."

Beth's got a faraway look in her eyes, "I think you're going to be the last man standing."

Chapter 7

Judith wakes her up with a quiet, "Mama."

Beth sits up and lets the blanket fall off of her naked frame, sliding up from under the blankets and seeing Daryl sitting on the couch with his crossbow sitting across his knees. Judith is sitting up on the foot of the bed, nothing but a rag diaper on. It wasn't even the cloth diaper she had had on last night. Beth looks at Daryl questioningly.

"Woke up cause she pissed through her clothes." Daryl said lowly.

Well shit. Those were all she had.

Shamelessly Beth balls up one of the cleaner blankets and leans against it, settling back and letting Judith crawl to her so that she can latch the toddler onto her breast. There's a flash of pain and she winces. Judith has another tooth.

"Gotta move on," Beth says through her teeth (god, that hurts!), "She needs clothes, it's getting too cold. And we need more food, and a solid place to hole up for a few days."

"Yeah," Daryl agrees. "Get dressed, eat somethin' and we'll get outta here."

Beth realizes for the first time just how badly her head hurts. Her eyes feel heavy and crusted over, and every inch of her is sore like it's been beaten or worse, and none of it has anything to do with what she had done with Daryl last night. Which, honestly, had been one of their less stellar ideas since the shine shack wasn't anywhere near as secure as they needed it to be, but Beth could blame it all on drunken stupidity. There's a pounding in her head coming from both directions and there's a slight tilt to the room that tells her if she stands up it's gonna start spinning.

"Alright?"

Beth shrugs, "Least I'm not blind."

Daddy always said that bad shine could make you blind.

"First hangover, huh, Lil' Girl."

Beth glares at him good-naturedly, "First drink, too, so what'da ya think?"

Daryl scratches at his neck, and the sound of his beard being raked through is oddly comforting. One thing in her life that hasn't changed.

"Don't you ever let me drink again," she tells him seriously as Judith stops nursing.

"Like I can control a single damn thing ya do," Daryl scoffs back.

Beth shakes her head at him, wincing at the pain that bursts behind her eyeballs. At least she doesn't feel like she's gonna be sick. Daryl passes her some crackers and a bottle of water and she eats and drinks them slowly, handing a cracker off to Judith. Moving hurts a little, and so she moves slowly. The crackers stay in her stomach, so that's a relief.

She gets dressed slowly, underwear (what's left of it) jeans, boots, tanktop, shirt. She leaves her sweater off, wrapping Judith in it before tucking her into the backpack and slinging that on as well. She looks at Daryl, who has moved over by the door.

"Ready?"

"Yeah."

They leave as quietly as they came, hand in hand.

Chapter 8

Beth stands still as Daryl drapes one of the cleanest blankets they had kept over her shoulders. "We'll find someplace," he reassures her.

She nods.

They need to find so much more than a place. Judith needs more diapers, and clothes, and toys to keep her occupied, and a whole other mess of things that they're aren't able to get her if they're holed up for the winter.

"Outta be a town around here somewhere," Beth says quietly.

They walk through the tress until they find a road. There's a few walkers (easy enough to take care of) and some cars that won't start. They pick them over, looking for anything helpful, useful, but they don't find much. Daryl pulls out a map that Beth didn't realize he had. He sees the expression on her face.

"Found it in the shack."

He points to a spot. "This is the prison." Looking at the map critically he points to another spot, "This is bout where we are now, I guess."

"Where's the nearest town?" Beth wants to know.

Daryl points to one more spot.

"And how far away is that?"

"Twenty miles or so, least two or three days with the baby. Might find a house 'er somethin' before that."

He leads.

Beth follows.

They're louder than they should be, and that's mostly because of Judith. It just means they have to be more alert, more careful, listen harder to see if they might have pulled a few strays that hear Judith's noises. She babbles constantly, a stream of gurgles and, "Mamamamamama."

They honestly don't mind it though, even with it putting them in more danger. The noise means that she's still with them, that she's still alive and as healthy as she can be. They walk all day and find a double wide just off the highway to hole up in for the night. The next day is the same. And the next.

The town they make it to is small, got a dollar general, a liquor store, a hardware store, a Grandma's Kitchen type resturant, and what looks like an old baitshop. Add in the gas station

and you've got a little town. There's cars all around, a couple of walkers that are drawn to them by the noises Judith makes. Daryl takes them down quietly, and the first place they hit is the dollar store. The front doors are all messed over with dust and god knows what else, but they can hear walkers inside.

Daryl bangs on the door and waits for them all to shuffle forward before trying to slide it open. He lets them out one, two at a time so that they're not overwhelmed and it only takes about twenty minutes to kill them all.

Beth nearly cries when she sees all of the diapers. There's plenty, enough for a couple of months at least as long as they can find a car with some gas. She grabs a buggy and tosses them all inside of it, grabbing as many sets of clothes that are Judith's size that she can find. She adds wipes, some toys, new bottles and a blanket and an actual baby carrier that isn't a backpack with some holes cut into it.

She tries not to think of the reason why the baby side is so well stocked and the other areas of the store seem to be picked over.

Beth finds another sweater for her, and a denim jacket that looks like it might fit Daryl. There's a water bottle in the aisle where the drinks used to be, and she takes that too. Daryl comes around the corner with another buggy, with a few cans of odds and ends that nobody else wanted, some bottles of soda that Beth knows he'll dump as soon as they find some more water, and a couple of boxes of crackers. He's also got a flashlight and some batteries, a pack of matches, and some small light books they can use as fire starter.

Beth pulls the buggy to the front and prays they can find a car with some gas so they don't have to leave this all behind.

Chapter 9

They're lucky, for once.

They find a car that looks to be in good enough shape. Daryl fiddles with some stuff under the hood while Beth keeps watch, and they're able to siphon enough gas out of the other cars to get it to start.

They only go a couple of miles though. There's no need to go any further, not when they spot the driveway just off the highway right outside of town. It's a little double wide tucked back into the trees, a blink and you miss it kind of thing. No walkers, looks like whoever had lived here another lifetime ago had cleared out when it all started. There's just some dust and the lingering scent of stale air. The place is empty except for some ratty furniture, but it'll do for now.

Not permanent, just for now.

Beth keeps Judith strapped to her even though the baby clearly wants down. With her newly learned ability to walk and somewhat working (if a little shaky) legs the baby just wants to run. The thought of her running sends a terrifying shot through Beth's heart.

Beth wonders why the world had to end, why a miracle like little Judith might just be the thing that is their downfall in this new world. Why can't she just be a baby? Why, every time she moves, Beth wants to die inside. She wants to give the baby her freedom, to let her run and scream and fly and grow up normal. But she can't. Every sound Judith makes (because of course she's going to make sounds, she's a fucking toddler for god's sake) puts them in a little more danger.

So she sits in the little house with Judith while Daryl boards up all the windows, dangling a little string in front of the baby's face and watching Judith's eyes light up with glee as her fat little fingers reach up for the end of it. Beth smiles, then slips the string back into a pocket of her backpack, pulling out a red plastic cup and leaving Judith sitting in a cleared spot on the floor while she tries to make this room a little more livable.

She pushes the trash out of the way and manages to find some blankets in the closet with only a few moth holes in them. She works on making a little cot in the corner of the room, right by the door that leads to what was once a well kept backyard. She gives Judith a small breakfast bar to mash between the four tiny teeth that she's managed to grow and sits to wait for Daryl to come back inside. When he does, she's waiting with a small bottle of water and another breakfast bar.

They allow themselves one small moment of normalacy as he takes the food from her and presses his cheek against to top of her head, her hands winding around his back to squeeze for a few brief seconds. They settle then, backs pressed against the wall and Judith sitting in between them.

"Are we going to stay here?" Beth asks quietly.

Daryl shrugs lightly, chewing and swallowing before he replies. "Maybe. Maybe not. 'S kinda close to the road. Rather be further back, somethin' more defensible."

Beth looks him dead in the eye at that. "You mean something more permanent." She realizes.

Daryl shrugs again, unable to meet her eyes now.

"More permanent," she says again, "We find something more permanent and that means that we're not going to look."

"Look fer what?"

"Our people."

She almost loses it when Daryl shrugs for a third time. But she doesn't. Doesn't say anything, thinks everything, and they end the night still stewing in silence.

Chapter 10

Daryl knows that he's pissed her off. There was no avoiding it. Winter is coming, they can feel it in the chill of the air, and there's nothing they can do about that. The walkers will get slower, sure, but the people won't. The people will be desperate. Desperate enough to do anything.

What they don't know is that he will walk through fire for the two people sleeping by his feet.

He took the first watch.

Of course he did.

He reaches in his pocket and plays with the little ring that he picked up when Beth wasn't looking. It wasn't real, but that didn't matter. Those kinds of things were worth nothing in a world where lives and weapons and food had more value. Now the only thing that matters to him is Judith and Beth and making sure they live long enough to see if the rest of their family made it out alive.

He doesn't want to let himself think like that, doesn't want to admit that the thought of letting himself believe and hope is also secretly killing him inside. But then there is also a nagging voice, a nagging fear that if he give up now then he's proving some devil inside himself right.

With this life, they might not have tomorrow to search for and find their loved ones. But doing so just might put them at greater risk. He doesn't know what they should do in the morning. His head is a mess.

They don't talk when she wakes up. There's that unspoken kind of communication that they've been developing for months as Daryl glances at her for a moment before slipping out the door. He's gone for a few hours into the dimness of the forest, but he knows that Beth isn't worried about him. Not yet anyway. Not to the point of thinking that he might not be coming back. They've got to eat, and breakfast bars and the few things they've managed to scavenge aren't going to cut it forever.

He comes back with a few squirrels and a rabbit, and when she opens the door with a small smile he knows he's forgiven. It doesn't solve the problem of them deciding what to do, but for now the main issue is getting food in their bellies and meat on their bones to get ready for winter. And he's brought food, and they can talk about moving on when they are ready.

Beth sits on the steps with Judith in her lap and watches as he builds a small fire to cook the meat over. He had already skinned it where he shot it, knowing it was enough of a risk to bring the meat back to the trailer without bringing the extra scent of guts as well. He shoves a stick through the little skinned bodies and sets them on top of the fire once it's going enough.

"Hungry?" Daryl wants to know.

Beth nods.

"You need to teach me how to track." she says suddenly.

But Daryl knows enough of Beth to know that it wasn't just a random thought. He can tell that she's held the idea in for a while now, and it doesn't surprise him. She shot the Governor clean through the eye with only a little bit of target practice and didn't even blink. He knows what she thinks of herself, thought of herself. She told him all her secrets in those late nights spent in the prison. There is nothing hidden between them.

Killing walkers. Killing people. Being a mother. There's nothing Beth Greene can't do in this world.

She's starting to realize it too, if she doesn't know it already.

"Should teach ya, huh?" he can't help but tease.

But he can tell the way Beth's jaw sets that that was the wrong way to go about it. "What if we get separated, Daryl? How will I know how to find you?"

His face falls and he pulls the cooked meat off of the fire and balances it on some rocks so that it can cool off above the dirt.

"Okay."

There was never any question about it anyway.

Chapter 11

The sunlight is what woke Beth up. She sits up from her position on the floor, watches as Daryl leaves. Watches as he comes back. Takes the cooked meat from him, chews a mouthful for Judith. It's time for her to learn how to track, he knows, he understands. They always understand each other.

Their argument from the night before is still crawling around in her head, filling her with an anger that she's not sure what to do with. She strokes her hand over Judith's little head and watches as the toddler moves around the small trailer. The little blonde girl is becoming more and more sure of herself, more and more steady on her feet as the days pass by. A few more weeks and Beth'll need a bigger backpack or sling to carry Judith around in.

Beth looks over their supplies, does a quick inventory with practiced eyes that have slid back into the habits she learned while living on the road in the months before the prison. She looks up as Daryl slips into the trailer, sliding the door shut quietly behind him. She gives him a small smile, lets him know that he's forgiven.

She doesn't want to admit it, but she has to. He's right, after all. He's hardly ever wrong.

Judith needs stability. They need stability. Whether or not she likes it, they need to bed down somewhere for the winter, and she supposes here is as good as any. She pulls her messy braid out of the elastic and runs her fingers through it as best she can. Maggie used to help her with her hair. Maggie used to braid it for her. Mama used to do it before Maggie. Beth would do it for Judith one day. And maybe Maggie would never get to braid her hair again.

"Are ya okay?" Daryl asks her suddenly. He reaches a finger out to stroke her cheek gently.

Beth reaches her own hand up to trace the path that he had left for her. Her fingertip comes away wet and stained with tears. She shrugs.

"Jus' thinkin'."

"Thinkin' bout what?"

"Things I can't change."

She snuffles and wipes her nose roughly, letting out a rough cough. She leans into Daryl as they sit against the wall and reaches behind her to re-braid her hair. She fixes the band around the end when she's done and sighs as she tips her head back. Judith is at her feet, playing with a plastic cup. That baby loves plastic cups, and Beth is glad. Everywhere they go they're sure to find one, after all. No one finds any use in plastic cups anymore, not when they don't have a lid.

Daryl shifts next to her and the floorboards beneath them creaks. Whether it's the trailer or just the shifting bodies upon the floor doesn't matter. Beth is used to creaky places with noises. She grew up in an old farmhouse. The sound comforts her, just a little. She coughs

again and Daryl passes her one of their water bottles. Just looking at it makes her even more thirsty and she takes it from him gratefully, leaning over a little further to press a kiss to his jaw. He turns his head at just the right moment and captures her lips with his own.

Chapter 12

As sweet as they are to each other, there's an undercurrent of hurt and hopelessness that eats at them sometimes. He doesn't wake her for the watch, doesn't take her hunting, and though she understands why (who would take a baby hunting in the woods in all this mess) it still hurts her.

Makes her think of what he thinks about her. Makes her wonder just how soft he thinks she is and what's going to happen if she doesn't learn and they get separated. She never wanted to think like this, but she does. And as much as she hates him taking the lion's share of the work, she's grateful at the same time. She tries to show it, in her kisses, and by pressing her body tightly to his whenever they dare to have a moment to themselves. She's grateful, because she feels like she's been sliced into pieces, like the blade that carved her daddy's head from his shoulders carved something from her as well, and like the bullet that blew a hole in her daddy's killer was shoved through her skin the second she pulled that trigger.

They don't talk about it, but they both know in the brief moments they allow themselves to sleep they both dream about it. Beth has this quiet little whimper that she lets out whenever her dreams fill with the walker versions of their family and Daryl has this habit of shaking, just a little, and his breath quickens in a series of rough gasps before he's able to shake himself awake. But they don't talk about it.

Beth figures they should, at some point, but she's not at that point yet.

Daryl has lived this way almost all his life, he's used to this kind of rough and the sleeplessness and everything else. Beth may have survived nearly seven months outside the fences before the prison, but she's not used to this. They had more people back then. She's not used to this, and it shows.

Beth looks poorly, looks as exhausted as she feels, her wide blue eyes hovering over sleep-deprived, bruise-colored skin. There are some early mornings when she hears him shuffling around the trailer and he makes sure the windows are covered so that the sunlight doesn't jolt her awake before she's ready.

They work together to prepare their new home. They travel out to other areas around them, not too far that they can't make it back in less than a day, but they still travel. They find barbed wire, and loose metal, and a shovel, and other things. It takes several days, maybe a week, and they get a small trench dug around the outside of the double-wide. They rig alarms, make a low fence with the wire, rig the house so that there's a way out in each room and the ways out are covered, not obvious, won't let too much cold in once the cold weather really sits in.

Beth looks at him when they tie the final alarm off, once the trench is done and the fence (however crude) is complete.

"You're sleeping tonight."

It isn't a question. .

He's got Judith strapped to his back, the baby babbling happily. He swings the carrier (which is really just a backpack with some holes cut into it) over his shoulder and hands the toddler off to Beth.

"Okay. Hungry?"

"Yes."

They eat a dinner of beans and a rabbit he shot that morning, sitting on the floor of the living room with the front door open to let in the sunlight. Outside, there's a small haze and the smell of cooked meat from the little campfire they had cooked on and covered up once they were done. Daryl looks up at the grey-covered sky.

"Gonna rain soon."

Beth doesn't question him. Daryl's never wrong about those sorts of things.

"Need to find some containers," she responds, "Catch it when it happens, start a water stash."

She balances Judith on her knee. "Need to start her sipping water, I think my supply is running low."

Daryl reaches out and chucks the baby on the chin with his knuckles. "She'll be fine. She'll just have to get used to it." A strange sort of fire glints in his eyes, and it makes Beth feel excited. "Means I won't have to share anymore."

"Daryl!"

He laughs, and it's a good sound.

"We definitely need the water though," he adds, "Don't need you getting dehydrated."

They find some pots and pans in the kitchen and an old glass lemonade jug with a lid buried in the back of one of the cabinets. Beth rubs the dust off of them the best she can and they lay them outside to catch the coming rain.

Daryl watches the sky with his normal brooding look on his face.

"What is it?" Beth wants to know.

"Winters getting closer." She already knew that. "Be glad when it snows, plenty of water then."

Beth smiles as a thought crosses her mind, looks down at the baby babbling beside her. "We could teach Judith how to build a snowman."

The baby in question looks up when Beth says her name, and gives a toothy grin. "Mama!"

Beth knows why she's doing this, knows that she's the only mother that the girl has ever known, but it still hurts a little inside that Lori isn't here for this.

They found an old tub and several blankets in better condition than the rest, using it all to make a crib for the baby. Mobile as Judith is now, she could crawl out of it in a heartbeat, but it serves its purpose in giving her a soft place to sleep. It's rough living, but it's comfortable enough.

Beth sighs. "We're staying here."

It wasn't a question.

"Yeah."

"Do you think they're looking for us?"

"I'm sure they're fine. And we're fine, and righ' now, s'all that matters."

Another week passess. There's some trailers off in the trees less than a mile beyond the one they've claimed as their own. They go out each day, quiet and careful, Judith strapped to one of them. They come back with little things, spoils of this quiet war. Plants that are safe to eat, animals that Daryl knows how to skin and dry out so that it lasts longer, some candles, some more blankets and clothes.

One house even has a baby's room, silent and empty of life. It's a boys room, but that doesn't matter to them. A coat is a coat, and shoes are shoes, and toys are toys, and Judith is not growing up in a world where her family cares whether or not her things are pink instead of blue. They hit the jackpot in one of the trailers further back from the road, find several bags of rice and three very large (cereal box size) containers of dried beans. Some cans of diced tomatoes and chili's, some jars of random seasonings. Everything is covered with dust before they take it, and this makes Beth feel relieved and saddened at the same time. Dust means no one has been by here in months. Means no bad people, but also means none of their people.

They build quite a stash. Judith starts getting fed mashed beans. She turns her nose up at first, but once she realizes she's going to be given them for almost every meal she starts tentatively eating whatever solid food she is given. This makes Beth feel relieved. With each day that passes, it seems like she has less and less milk in her breasts. Sooner rather than later, it's going to run out. Judith has to be a year old by now, or nearly. She's got plenty of teeth and gums and this baby is going to make it.

Beth finds a calender, tries to track the days. She figures that they're someone in the end of October or the beginning of November. It might be stupid, trying to keep track, but it makes her feel some kind of normal.

"We ought to collect a bunch of that long, dry grass in that clearing." The clearing she was speaking of was about a mile away.

"Why?" Daryl wants to know.

"Read a book once, called the Long Winter. Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote it. It was her story, tellin' about how she and her family grew up and lived. One winter was almost like a blizzard that lasted for months and they didn't have any firewood, but they had hay. And they braided it, see, twisted it around itself till it formed sticks and that's what they used for fires. If there's sometime we get to where we don' wanna go out and get wood, might be a good idea to have some of those grass sticks dried and ready."

He smiled at her, scooting closer to him to press a kiss to the side of her mouth. "Alrigh', Lil' Girl. We'll make your grass sticks."

Makes Beth feel a little less useless. She knows in her head that she's not, but sometimes the head and the heart get all mixed up.

Judith's head rolls into her side, and she looks down to realize that the baby is fast asleep. Carefully, carefully, she slides her hands under the tiny body and lifts her up, stands, and tiptoes over to the makeshift crib.

Beth settles back down beside Daryl and lets out a sigh of contentment as he wraps an arm around her shoulders and begins to stroke up and down her side. It's quiet, the sun is going down. They have a trench and a fence and plenty of alarms. The baby is asleep and they're truly alone. Beth feels her breath quicken. Daryl feels it to, turns his head to press a rough kiss against her jaw. The feeling of his unshaved face rubbing against her smooth skin sends a thrill through her. Some people might think she's weird for loving the differences between them (his dark and rough to her pale and smooth) but it's not like she has a fetish or anything. She just knows that for some reason, god or whoever else is up there made her for this man. He leans in to press another kiss to her jaw, only this time Beth turns her head so that their lips meet.

There's a certain taste to kissing now, in a world where toothpaste doesn't really mean anything. Mouthwash is a thing of the past, the alcohol in it making it a prime target for anyone looking for a score. Gum was a hot commodity back at the prison, but there was no gum her. Just the taste of tobacco from his cigarettes and the rough feeling of his lips on hers. She twists around, rises up and settles herself down into his lap. He's rough, but not hurtful, filled with the sense of urgency they both have. Just because they both want this doesn't mean that it's smart. It's not smart, they know that, so it has to be quick.

Quick and quiet.

She's got herself wrapped all around him, their heavy winter clothing that they found doing nothing to hide the growing hardness between his legs. It presses up to the apex between her thighs, and there's a burning in Beth that she knows won't go away any time soon. She throws herself off of him, yanks her pants and underwear down as quickly as she can. While she's doing it, she watches as he unbuttons his jeans. He reaches inside to pull himself out.

"Don't."

Sometimes she just wants to do it herself.

She settles back down against him, lets him push up her shirt and bra so he can get a mouthful of the rest of her. He kisses and sucks and licks, stroking the flames inside her until it's a roaring fire. She lets out a quiet curse, and he shushes her. It irritates her a little, that he can drive her so crazy in only a few moments, so she reaches inside his pants for him and relishes the fact that his eyes practically roll in his head. She's the one who has to shush him now. She holds him steady as she raises up and slides down, and dammit if they both don't let out a moan.

They're quiet after that, as quiet as they both can be. Nothing echoes through the trailer but the sound of rocking and the occasional sharp gasp. She grabs his shoulders and holds on tight as something firmilar builds inside of her. They have to swallow they end of it as best they can, lips pressed tightly together. She comes down from her high panting, kissing any part of him she can reach. He strokes her back, tips her back just a little with a flex of his legs to look at her.

There's nothing more beautiful in this world.

They stay like that for a few minutes until Judith stirs and reminds them where they are.

"Sleep," he tells her once they've resituated themselves.

She doesn't argue, laying down with a smile on her face.

Chapter 13

"Teach me how to shoot the bow?"

Daryl looks up from where he's skinning their supper. "Huh?"

"I know we've got the rifle, and my pistol, and my knife. But the bullets won't last, and I think it's a good idea for you to teach me how to shoot the bow."

Beth knows Daryl can't refuse her anything. And she's right. "Alrigh', Lil Girl."

Later that day she squints down the length heavy weapon, a breeze blowing gently past her cheek. Judith is strapped to Daryl's back, mercifully quiet. There's a grey rabbit in front of her and they're trying not to spook it. Daryl is standing just behind her, his warm breath tickling the back of her neck and sending a little bit of a thrill through her. He's given her enough space to shoot, but he's still just right there in case she needs him. For some reason, she remembers something that she told Carol months ago, back when they were at the prison.

"We're weak without him."

Truthfully, she was wrong. *They* aren't weak without Daryl. She is. Or she would be if she ever were to lose him. Losing Daddy had nearly torn her in two, still hurts sometimes even though it was a month or so now, and in this fucked up world they lose someone in the blink of an eye and it's to be expected that it will happen sooner rather than later. She can't ever lose him, or Judith.

The thought causes her to jerk and she presses her finger on the trigger before she realizes it. The bolt goes cleanly through the neck of the small animal, and it drops.

"Well," Daryl says, "There's supper." He looks at her with a critical eye, "Loosen up a little bit more next time. You're too tight."

Beth lets out a snort, and Daryl's face colors. "I didn't mean it like that, dammit." Wanting to make her feel just as embarrassed as he does, "I'd never complain about that anyway."

It works. Her face heats up and she knows that she's bright red.

Shooting the crossbow was nothing like shooting her rifle. With her rifle, she just aimed and pulled. This required more focus, a steady mind, and unfortunately, the draw-weight was too much for her. So while it was a good idea for her to learn how to shoot it, it would never help her if she was ever on her own because she simply couldn't load it. Daryl had watched her struggle for a few minutes back at the trailer until her forehead was covered in sweat.

"We'll find you one of your own someday," he promises.

She goes to the rabbit, grabs up the carcass, and pulls the arrow out. She looks at Daryl with a flirtatious smile on her face, her embarrassment fading.

"What?" he wants to know.

"Am I the only girl you let handle your bow?"

He grins right back at her, and says nothing.

They eat good that night, Judith chewing on some meat that Beth had chewed up for her so she didn't choke on it. The breeze around them continued to blow, reminding them both that the seasons were changing and sooner rather than later it would be winter. The light around them was fading, but it had been a beautiful day, clear and sunny with a crisp and cool breeze. They were both southerners, and they knew how to smell a change in the air, and the air had been changing even before the prison had fallen.

"What day do you think it is?" Beth wants to know.

"No idea. Don' really care, to be honest."

Beth had used to keep track. It had been hard, all those months on the road, but she had tried. Then she had kept track with they were in the prison. But now, she had no idea what day it was and no way of knowing. Honestly, though, did it even matter anymore? She looked down at Judith, one chubby fist with some chewed-up chicken, one with some mashed-up beans. It did matter.

"We'll figure it out. Gotta give her a Christmas."

Time didn't seem to pass like normal anymore. The prison, and happiness seemed to be a distant memory of a long-forgotten life. Even though, logically she knew it had only been a month (maybe a little bit longer) sometimes the grief gripped her so badly that it felt like it had only been days. Those were the days she could barely even get out of the trailer, and Daryl had to help her with more than a few things. Other times, she could look at Judith and Daryl and be grateful that they had each other and they were alive and it felt like it had been years with just the three of them.

It got dark quickly now, and so they put out the fire and turned in for the night after making sure the alarms and the tripwire that they had fashioned were still secure. They got Judith to go down, and Beth took the first watch this time. She sat on the floor by one of the windows, looking up at the clear sky as the sun slowly sank down and the stars started peaking out. Daryl had bedded down beside her, his head twisted to lay in her lap, and as the cool night air settled in she found herself feeling grateful for his added warmth. She smiles as his eyes drift shut and he nuzzles closer to her as he slips into sleep.

She didn't know why it was so easy for them to love each other, but it was. It was simple, and quiet, and powerful, and all-consuming all at the same time. She didn't know how else to explain it, and maybe that was their thing, not needing words. She spends hours like that, baby asleep, his head in her lap, loving the stillness and the quiet of it all. She's just about to wake him when it ends.

There's any earthshattering explosion. It can't possible be close to them, as muffled as it is, but she still hears it, still feels the ground tremble with it. Daryl jerks awake with a curse and

Judith starts to cry, startled out of her peacefulness. Daryl is already on his feet, crossbow in hand, standing outside at the door. He's got it cracked open and even in the black of the night Beth can see his eyes illuminated with the fire now burning in the far distance. Beth darts over to the crib and pulls Judith to her chest, murmuring soothingly.

"Daryl?"

"Stay here, Lil Girl. Imma check it out."

Fear always makes his southern drawl thicken.

"No." Beth's tone is firm. "We go together."

"Beth-"

"Ah mean it Daryl. What if it's them?"

He looks at her determined expression and nods.

"Alrigh'."

They creep forward into the night, Daryl in front and Beth just a few steps behind. Even Judith seems to realize the seriousness of the situation and stays silent in her place on Beth's back. They both know that the only way they can go is forward.

Chapter 14

Beth wakes up slowly, feeling like a diver surfacing for air. Everything is blurry like a film is covering her eyes. She reaches her hand up to rub them and lets out a curse when she hits herself in the face with a cast over her wrist. Her fingers touch something rough on her cheek, and she realizes that there are stitches binding together a slice that cuts across her face. Looking down at herself, she wonders who put her in the scrubs. There's daylight coming through the window, and she's on a bed more comfortable than she's had in a long time. Something about this feels wrong. It all feels wrong. There's an I.V. in her arm and something important is missing.

It comes to her all of a sudden, nearly knocks her back out with the force of it.

Judith.

She rips out the I.V. needle, uncaring of the trail of blood that it sends down her arm and stands up swiftly, nearly falling down in the process as her legs almost give out.

That's the key word though. Almost.

This is a hospital room and they were stupid enough to leave her with a needle. She grips it in her hands like a blade, because it's the only weapon she's got right now. They've taken everything from her, her clothes, her guns, her baby. That was their first mistake. For some, it might even be their last. She crouches by the end of the bed and waits. That's all she can do right now. The distance to the door isn't that great, and she can see the deadbolt that more than likely can only be opened from the outside. Then she can hear a key twisting, see the knob turn, and the door gets pushed open to reveal a man in a white coat.

A doctor.

Beth used to love history, and she remembers vaguely something about it being a war crime to attack those who were incapable of proving themselves with a defense. But that was then, and this was now, and they took her *baby*. He doesn't even get a second to breathe before she is on him, pressing him back into the wall and pressing the needle tightly against his neck. She uses her body to hold him against the wall and pulls the tubing from the I.V. out of the bag hanging on a stand next to her so that the plastic hangs loose between them. Glancing out the half open door and seeing an empty hall, Beth nudges the door shut until it's only open a crack. She doesn't dare give them another opportunity to lock her up.

"Quiet," she hisses at the stuttering man, "Where is this place? What have you done to me? Where is *my daughter*?"

He can't even seem to form a sentence, and a sudden slickness beneath her feet causes her to sneer in disgust. She lifts her leg swiftly to knee him firmly in the nuts, dragging him down to his knees in front of her and peering through the crack in the door. She pushes him in front of her as she takes a few tentative steps outside the room. There's a few people dressed in scrubs down the other end of a long hallway staring at her with wide eyes and gaping mouths. And

then there's a cop coming out of one of the doors. She's got dark hair, slicked back into a ponytail, and a perfectly pressed uniform on, and she takes a step back when she sees Beth and whose life she has in her hands.

"You're awake," the cop says softly, "That's good."

Beth cuts her eyes left and right. "What is this place?" she demands, yanking the doctor up in front of her.

"This is Grady Memorial, in Atlanta. You're safe here. Some of my officers found you, fighting off some of the rotters. They saved you, brought you here."

Beth meets her eyes for the first time and feels a little haunted at the deadness in the other woman's gaze. "Just me?"

The cop gives a knowing smile. "Not just you."

Beth jerks the doctor up higher, presses the needle to his neck. "Where is she?"

There's a coo just a little ways down from them and a tall, lanky African-American boy (man? boy? Beth isn't sure) comes out of one of the doorways slowly, a little piece of heaven in his arms.

"Give her to me."

"Let Dr. Edwards go."

Beth doesn't even have to think about it, she lets the piss-soaked man drop to her feet and reaches for Judith. The boy looks at the lady cop and doesn't move until she nods at him. Beth makes a note of that, and tucks it away. She knows who is in charge here now.

"My officers found you."

That doesn't sound right.

"You were on the side of the road, fighting off rotters. They knocked you back, you must have hit your head. The baby wouldn't stop screaming. So now you're here."

That sounds even less right. Beth assesses herself, silently, as she cradles the toddler closer to her chest. She's too sore, in all the wrong areas. If she were to look under the scrubs she would see the black and blue bruises all over her ribs and thigh on her right side. She's smarter than they think she is, but she can't let them know that.

Not now at least.

"I'm Officer Dawn Lerner."

Another tidbit for Beth to file away for later. Dawn Lerner. She's in charge here, as much as she wants to act like she's not. The dead look in her eyes causes Beth to feel unsettled, like there's a churning in the pit of her stomach.

"What's your name?"

Beth stands there, clutching Judith, feeling the baby reach for her hair and listening to her gum on her own fist. She blinks more than once, trying to gather herself and her thoughts. Trust no one who isn't us, that was what Daddy and Rick and Daryl and all the others had taught her. The only ones who truly look out for you are family. But she's stuck in this hospital, she doesn't have her guns or knives or anything but a fresh change of clothes and the baby in her arms and now is the time for her to be smarter than that.

"I'm Beth."

Dawn turned her dead eyes to Judith with a question on her face. Beth had to hold back a snarl.

"Judith." She shifts her weight from one foot to the other. "There was someone else, that we were with. A friend. Family. Are they here to?"

Dawn leans back, and rests her hand a little too comfortably on the pistol at her side. "The two of you were the only ones my officers found in the street."

But they were nowhere near the street...

Where were they, exactly? Where was Daryl? Beth wracks her brain, but nothing comes to the front. She can't remember a single damn thing beyond the last night she and Daryl were together. There's a throbbing, stabbing pain in her head and she reaches her hand up to brush her hair out of her face, cursing when she touches a swollen bump roughly the size of a golf ball.

That's probably why she can't remember shit.

"You'll fit in just fine here."

Beth doesn't want to know what 'fitting in just fine' looks like. But she's going to learn. She knows the look on this woman's face. Dawn is going to make sure Beth Greene learns.

Problem is, she doesn't know anything about Beth Greene. Beth knows that look. Dawn thinks she's just another dead girl. Dawn is the one who is really going to learn. But Beth knows nothing about this place, or the people in it, and she's unarmed with Judith and she's going to have to play this outright.

Dawn disappears back down the hall, taking the boy who had held Judith with her and leaving Beth with the sniveling, piss-soaked Dr. Edwards. The weak man staggers to his feet. Beth leans back away from him.

"Welcome to Grady," he coughs out.

Yeah. Sure. Welcome.

It doesn't feel like that at all.

Chapter 15

This was his fault.

All of it.

All of it was his fault.

Times like this, he felt his age.

See, Beth was Beth and Daryl was Daryl and together they were Beth and Daryl and it had been that way for nearly a year. And if you asked anyone with sense, Daryl had grown up different from anyone else he knew. He was different. He was Daryl, and he was made to love someone like Beth. Her age had bothered him for a bit at first, but then they were just two people in love and that was all that it needed to be.

But today he felt his age.

Today he felt older than dirt.

Because it was his fault. All of it. All of it was his fault.

He should have been the man, should have put his foot down, should have insisted that Beth stay back with that baby. He was the man, he was supposed to keep them both safe.

But he failed.

He failed.

They had darted through the woods, moved together as one as they had become accustomed to doing. They traveled for a few hours as the sun sank down into the sky. Judith had fallen asleep and from the corner of his eye he could see Beth limping just a little and he knew her feet must be hurting something fierce. But they kept moving, kept pressing forward. It was the only way they could go at this point.

Dammit, he should have sent her back the moment he realized it. He should have flat out told her this was a stupid idea and she wasn't. Fucking. Coming.

But he hadn't.

They had come upon the place as daylight started to creep across the sky. There was a fence, some buildings, the earth scorched with fire marks and flames flickering down from a massive burn, that was just now coming down. There were half eaten bodies and freshly turned walkers all around, the all-to-familiar signs of a major fight that had just taken place. But there was no one left alive.

"Look," Beth whispered suddenly, mindful of the walkers ahead of them, "The fence."

Looking forward, he knew what she meant. There were parts of the fence nearest the treeline that looked damaged and that had some of the grime wiped off of them, like someone had climbed up over them and slid down the metal panels that covered the side that the two of them could see.

"I see it," he had whispered back, "But it doesn't mean anything." He caught sight of her face and sighed, "It doesn't Beth. Look, Lil girl, there's no one here."

Beth's face had fallen, and it had broken his heart. "Okay," she said quietly.

They were gonna go back, but then there were gunshots off somewhere in the distance. He knows Beth, knows her better than anyone else, and he knew what that look in her eyes was. It was hope. She's gone before he can even blink, running away from him off into the distance.

"BETH!"

But she always did move like a deer (even with the baby attached to her), all legs and grace and speed. And then she's gone, off into the trees out of his sightline no matter how quickly he moves to catch up with her.

"BETH!"

There's a thump, and a scream, and even through the trees he is able to see someone struggling, disappearing over the next hill. But there's a hundred trees between them and as fast as he is, the other people are faster. He can hear Judith screaming and he cusses under his breath.

"BETH! JUDITH!"

He makes it over the hill and is met with a road, tires squealing off a black car with a white cross painted on it. He tries to line up a shot with the crossbow aimed at the tire but it misses, bounces off the side.

"No, no no no!"

"BETH!"

It's too late. The car is gone.

He's alone.

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He's not sure how long he sits on the ground in despair, curled in on himself and struggling not to cry.

"What do we have here?"

He really must be out of it if he didn't see a whole group of fuckers walk up on him. Even with his head bowed, he can count the boots. There's at least six of them, if not more in the trees. He doesn't move a muscle, not until the reach for his bow. It's then that he uncoils, strikes like a snake. Throws a wide left hook, knocks down what can only be the leader. He's got his bow up and cocked before anybody else can blink and then the man is on the ground, blood spurting from his nose. Daryl tosses his head back to get his hair out of his eyes.

"M' claimin' the vest," someone behind him calls out, "Like them wings."

The man on the ground in front of him is laughing as he gets up, blood still running down his face. "A bowman, huh?" he chuckles, "Like me a bowman. Man carries a rifle, could have any sissy job in the before days. But a bowman's a bowman, through and through no matter what fucked up world we're living in." He eyes down Daryl's sightline. "Whatcha got there, hundred-fifty pund draw?" He doesn't wait for Daryl to respond, "I'll be donkey-licked if that don't fire least three-hundred feet per second."

He's got this look in his eyes that sends a shiver down Daryl's spine. "Been lookin' for me a weapon like that, course, I'd rather have one with more ammo and less bloodstains." The man's gaze turns dead and serious. "Pull that trigger and these men will drop you, several times over."

There's a rustling behind them, and Daryl can hear more footsteps approaching. More men. He's fucked.

"Lookie here, man," the leader calls out, "A bowman. Didn't you tell me yer brother was a bowman on a hog?"

There's the sound of flesh striking flesh, someone landing a blow behind him, "Put them gun's down, ya fuckers!"

He knows that voice.

Daryl isn't given enoough time to think, enough time to breath before he's being yanked back into a rough embrace, metal slicing through one of his arms with a coughed out apology.

"Hey, baby brother."

"Merle?"

## Chapter 16

They gave her a room with a small cot for Judith, told her about the system and how she was expected to work off what ever she took. She didn't like the sound of that, didn't like the thought of 'owing' anyone. It made her miss the prison something fierce. They wait about two days before they come for her.

"Need your help with a patient." It's the pisser, Dr. Edwards. "Leave the baby with one of the orderlies."

Next second he's spitting blood when Beth shoves him into the wall.

"I'll come with you," she tells him calmly as he collects himself, "But you're fucking stupid if you think I'm letting her out of my sight."

He lets out a wet cough, "There's just some things that kids shouldn't see, you know? That's all I was saying."

Beth isn't impressed. "How long have you been here?" she wants to know.

"Since the start of the Turn."

She laughs. "This baby was born on the outside. She's seen more than you. She'll be fine."

And Beth will be damned if Judith isn't with her. Even though she knows she needs to be careful in this place until she knows it, she's still prepared to bash heads and rip throats if they threaten the baby. Judith is all she has left. She's been wracking her brain trying to figure out how they got here, and she has no idea. It's like it's blocked out of her memory, stuck somewhere that she can't reach. She straps Judith to her back with the carrier they had given back to her the day before and allows herself to be led down the hall.

There's another room, a man on a bed attached to some monitors and machines. Beth has no idea how this place is still running until she sees the battery hookups on the wall away from the door.

"His name is Gavin Trevitt," Dr. Edwards tells her. Beth doesn't remember asking. "He's been here for a few days. Dawn wanted him saved, she wants everyone saved, but it's been days since he was brought in and he hasn't woken up."

The man is covered in bruises from head to toe on every part that's visible and not covered with clothing. It's almost like he ran into something.

*Or something ran into him.* the thought comes unbidden into Beth's mind.

"Press that button."

Beth knows when to fall in line. She presses the buttons that Edwards points out to her, flips a switch and listens to the click. The machine noises stop, the ventilator stops pumping, and after a few minutes, the man's chest stops rising. The heart monitor flatlines as Dr. Edwards plunges a small blade just behind the man's ear.

"Come on," Edwards tells her, "Got to finish the job."

She helps him dump the body down an elevator shaft, takes note of the sound of the walkers below, and tries to keep a passive face as she hears the sounds of them feasting on their latest meal. She sees the elevator shaft for what it is - a way out. A dangerous way out, but a way out nonetheless.

"Go get yourselves something to eat."

She walks in the direction that he points, passing by someone at the end of the hall with a mop and a bucket. It was the man who had held Judith, who had given the baby back to her. Out of instinct, she adjusts the straps of the carrier and pulls the baby tighter on her back. Judith lets out a whimper and Beth mutters soothingly. She meets his eyes. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

There's a cafeteria here, with fresh fruit and vegetables. Beth wonders where they came from, so far all she's seen of the hospital is the same floor she woke up on. There's other food too, and trays, and there's some people sitting down at some tables with their lunch who can't stop staring at the baby on her back. She shifts with the uncomfortableness of it. There's an officer on the other side of the counter. Well, Beth thinks it's an officer, but the truth is it could be anyone. He could have gotten that uniform off of anyone. He's got slicked-back hair that looks more greasy than it should and a smirk on his face that makes her feel sick to her stomach. She reaches for a couple of slices of bread and tucks some of it into the pocket of her scrubs, reaching back to hand Judith the piece she left out. To her left, some orderly makes a mark on a clipboard, and Beth understands a little bit more of what it means to owe these people.

"Well, if it isn't our little damsel in distress." The greasy officer looks her up and down slowly like he's evaluating a sack of goods.

"My partner and I were the ones that saved you. We went after some guns farther out than normal, heard the explosion, and found you in the woods fighting off a rotter. Wasted it, but you fell back and hit your head. So we brought you here." He sees the look on her face. "Probably don't remember, do you? That was a pretty hard knock to the head you took."

Beth watches him take some long, deep breaths through his nose and realizes with a new sense of disgust that he's trying to sniff her even with a counter between them. Judith babbles around the piece of bread and Beth takes a step back, meaning to leave.

"Now hold on, don't run off without an introduction. I'm Gorman. And you're pretty." He leans in closer, "Ya know, it's proper to thank somebody when they save you."

She looks him up and down slowly.

"Well, pretty?"

Beth looks him dead in the eye, "I'll thank you the day you tell me the truth about how I got here."

If anything, his gaze turns more hungry at the fire she displays.

"You've got a little fight in you, girly? I like that." He chuckles to himself, "You'll learn. Soon enough, you'll learn."

*No, but you will.*

This place makes Beth's skin crawl in the worse way. She's small and blonde and pretty and nobody ever really thinks that she's a threat, that she's something they have to watch. Back at the prison it had nearly killed her, being treated different from everyone else. Here, it works to her benefit. She can watch and listen and learn and hardly anybody bothers her unless they want to touch Judith. Beth had earned a harsh slap from Dawn that had split her stitches the first time she had pushed an officer who had tried to take Judith from her. Nobody else had tried to touch the baby though, so it was more than a little worth it.

Shadowing Edwards the way that she does, Beth is able to see a lot of things. Male officers coming out of rooms she knows belong to residents and orderlies with their shirts untucked and their belts undone. How people flinch back whenever someone in uniform approaches them. How Gorman's eyes seem to follow her figure every time they're in a room together. Dawn is supposed to be in charge, supposed to be in control, but even she can't seem to stop what is happening right under her nose. Beth isn't stupid, she knows what is going on. The world has become an ugly place and she was just lucky enough to have the family she had and the home that she had before all this. This is the ugly that people have turned in to, the ugly that they probably always were before the turn, now allowed to do whatever they wanted with no one available or willing to stop them.

Protect and serve.

Hah.

It's laughable these days.

## Chapter 17

Beth's suspicions and uneasy feelings are only proven right by two things.

First, she gets pulled into a rapid amputation when some of the officers come in carrying a woman strapped to a stretcher with a bite on her arm. Judith starts to cry on her back as Dawn screams at Beth to hold the girl down and they saw off the arm with the bite. Beth hears every word of the conversation through a bloody haze.

"Keep your hands off me! I'm NOT going back to him!"

"You don't have to!"

"You can't control them!"

"I will!"

Beth knows its a promise Dawn can't keep. Fortunately the girl passes out after a few runs of the wire and Beth is sent to calm Judith, toss the arm down the shaft, and get a fresh set of clothes from the man who had held Judith. His name turns out to be Noah.

He's the second thing that proves her feelings right. He takes one look at her blood-spattered scrubs and takes her to a supply closet to get her a new pair. He tries to leave the closet to give her privacy, but Beth stops him.

"Hold her?" she asks, somehow knowing that she can trust him, "Please?"

He takes the baby, bouncing her up and down lightly with his back turned to Beth as she shucks off her scrubs and puts the new ones on.

"What's her name?"

"Judith?"

"Does it have any meaning?"

She touches his shoulder, turning him around to face her, and he sees the confused expression on her face.

"Ya know, back when babies were being born every day, and every name had some kind of meaning behind it? My parents were religious, so we all got biblical names. Noah, David, Samuel. Why'd you pick Judith?" he sees the expression on her face, "You don't have to tell me," he hurries to add, "Was jus' wonderin'."

Beth doesn't know why, but she's comfortable with him. "Her brother named her."

Noah's eyes get wide at the explanation, "You don't look old enough to have two kids."

"I'm not," Beth drops her voice down to a whisper in case anyone else is listening, "I didn't birth her. Her momma, she was family, and she died, and now she's mine. We got separated from our people."

Noah's face grows sad. "Yeah, I know the feeling. It was me and everyone at our community, then me and dad went on a run and I made it and he didn't. And now I'm here."

Beth glances back at the door of the supply closet and sighs. Noah lays what is meant to be a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I wish I could tell you that it gets better, but I know this place and I know it doesn't. M' not stupid. They tried to sell me some story about how they could only take one of us back, so they left Dad behind because he was 'worse off'." His face gets hard. "Bullshit. Dad was bigger, stronger, and would have fought back. That's why they left him. They thought I was weak. Well, they'll find out."

It paints a clearer picture of exactly how she ended up here, and why Daryl isn't here. She might not remember exactly what happened, might never remember, but Noah's story makes her life make a little more sense in this moment. She gives Noah a knowing smile as they leave the closet together. They separate, Noah going one way and Beth going the other with the baby on her hip. Gorman is there by her door like he was waiting for her to get back. She feels her spine straighten like a steel rod and knows that she can't show weakness in front of this man.

"Waitin' on you."

Beth ignores him, tries to get to the door but he steps in front of it before she can.

"Still waiting on that thank you."

Beth had promised herself to be strong, to not show weakness, but then Gorman reaches out a hand to stroke Judith on the head and she knows that he's won. Judith is the only thing she has in this world right now, and she has no weapons to protect her.

"Thank you."

He smiles, cruel and greedy, "Now was that so hard?"

He steps to the side, laughs when she fumbles with the door. Beth slams it shut behind her, throws the bolt even though she knows they probably have the key, clutches the baby (toddler, she's too big to be a baby anymore...but she'll always be Beth's baby...) to her front and sinks back against the door, trying to keep the sobs coming out of her as silent as she can.

"Mama."

Beth cries just a little bit harder.

"It's gonna be okay," she whispers, "It's gonna be okay."

The door doesn't stay locked for long. It opens, slowly, and Dawn is revealed with an apologetic look on her face. Beth is sitting on the bed now, rocking Judith who is asleep in her arms. Dawn slides onto the bed slowly.



"This isn't a prison, you know."

Prison had been safer than this place.

"I'm giving you an opportunity here, to raise your baby in safety."

Beth's head snaps up, "We were just fine until your people took us."

To Dawn's credit, she doesn't deny the accusation.

"You've got food here, clothes, protection. Those things are not free, Beth, they've never been free."

Beth feels the anger inside her rising, "I didn't ask for this." She tries to keep her voice low so that she doesn't wake Judith.

"But you needed it."

Beth leans in closer to Dawn. "Did we?"

"Look, it's an honest system here. Work off what you owe, and you can leave. Simple as that. I won't charge you any extra for the baby, so that will help." Dawn pulls some crumbled up bread from behind her, the bread Beth had put in the scrubs she had been wearing when they cut off that girl's arm. "You need more than this though, if you're going to work hard enough to earn your ticket out of here."

Dawn leaves her then, lets her sleep. Beth lays the baby down on the bed and drags a dresser over the door to block it, putting herself between the door and the baby. She sleeps poorly, fitfully, and is sore when she wakes up the next morning. She takes Judith down to see the girl, for two reasons.

The girl (Jen? Joan?) looks like she could use a little bit of sunshine, and Beth could use a little bit more information.

Beth gives the girl a couple of pain killers before setting Judith down gently on the bed.

"You're stupid enough to have a baby in all of this?"

Beth doesn't respond, just leans in and asks, "What did they do to you?"

Joan (for that's her name) looks at Beth with new eyes. "What didn't they do is a better question. Dawn lets them do whatever they want. She could control them if she wanted, but she doesn't because it's easier to let them have what they want, do what they want. You can make as many deals with the devil as you need so long as you aren't the ones paying the price."

She reaches up a hand to stroke Judith's soft blonde curls, meets Beth's gaze with a new look in her eyes. "You need to get out."

"I know."

"Soon." Joan leans back on her bed a little, "And it would make a lot of folks happy if you took some of those sum' bitches out when you leave."

"I'll do my best." Beth leaves her in peace.

Gorman seems to be everywhere, eyes following her, a sucker tucked into his mouth that he seems to slurp on more whenever she's around. It makes Beth's skin crawl all day until she does to have Edwards look at her stitches. She's got a venomous look in her eyes as he turns her cheek a few different angles to catch the light of the fading sun through the window.

"Trying to save the batteries," he explains, "What's on your mind?"

"Do no harm."

His hand on her face stills.

"The hippocratic oath."

He can't meet her eyes.

"You let them do horrible things to people, and you just stand by and let it happen."

He stands up suddenly, nearly throwing her back in the chair she was sitting in. Judith squirms in her lap.

"They have guns, and I don't."

"So you're a coward and a horrible person."

He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, "At least I'm alive, can you say the same for your family."

Her punch is solid, connects right with his jaw, knocks him flat on his ass. She leaves him there, like the animal he is.

# Chapter 18

## Chapter Summary

I would like to note going forward for the next couple of chapters (I'm not sure how many just yet, let's say 10+ to play it safe) will have possibly triggering vibes within them. Anyone who's a WD fan knows what happened to those women at Grady, and while I don't want it to be central to the storyline (as a survivor of SA myself, it's not something I want to be a major plotline) there will be some situations mentioned going forward. No graphic details or descriptions will be included.

## Day 512 Post-Outbreak - Day 4 In Grady Memorial

It's a simple enough question.

"Do you want to get out of here with me?"

Beth isn't stupid. She's seen how these people look at Judith, how these people look at her, she heard what that poor girl had cried out just before they had sawed off her arm. Gorman's eyes follow her every time they're in a room together and it makes her skin crawl. Merle taught her better than this. Daryl taught her better than this. Her daddy taught her better than this. You don't just lay around and wait for the other shoe to drop. You don't let them make you the hunted instead of the hunter. She can't stay here, she can't let the baby stay here. She's not stupid.

It also might have something to do with the fact that Gorman cornered her again, tried to force a lollipop down her throat after it had been in his mouth, had pressed her up against the wall and told her she needed to be more careful who she listened to, "Specially since she's got that baby to worry about."

Edwards shows her some things, walkers in one of the lower levels, walkers outside the building from the roof. "This is why I stay," he tells her, but it just gives her more of a reason to leave.

If she was alone in here, by herself it would be one thing. But with Judith, with no weapons, nothing but her wit and no way to fight with a baby in her arms? She needs to get out of here. She's not stupid.

Noah seems to be though. He's got this stupid, blank look on his face.

Beth feels the need to repeat herself, "Do you want to get out of here with me?" He's still looking at her with that blank, stupid expression. "Haven't you ever wanted to leave?"

"Well, yeah," Noah stutters out, still shocked, "Guess I was just waiting for the right moment or something, I don't know."

Beth resists the urge to roll her eyes, shifting Judith on her hip and wincing as the toddler reaches up to pull her hair. "You've been here a year, Noah," she can't help but snap, "Way I see it, it's now or never."

"What's got your panties in a twist?"

Beth's mouth shifts into a snarl and she shoves Judith into Noah's arms. "That," she hisses, "That little girl right there, and knowing what goes on in this place, and knowing that the rest of our family is on the outside waiting for us to find them, and godammit I'm gonna fuckin' find them and I can't fuckin' do it trapped in this hellhole." She points down Judith in Noah's arms, "You take one look at that face and ask me again just exactly what's got my panties in a twist!"

"Alright," Noah sighs, "Let me figure something out."

"Don't take too long," Beth warns, "We don't have much time."

They have less than they think. The next few hours are a blur of wrong medications, Noah getting dragged off so the shit gets beat out of him, and Edwards smirking down at her tear-filled eyes as she clutches Judith to her chest and he tells her it was her fault. But it wasn't her fault, she had done what she was told. The only problem was she had trusted him in the first place. And then there's a confrontation, there's Dawn spouting some bullshit story about the greater good and how Beth is worthless and everyone just needed to be kept happy. Pulling her wrist out to show her the scar on the wrist (like she didn't already know it was there) and using it as another way to dig under Beth's skin, to call her weak and worthless.

"You don't know shit." Beth yanks back her arm.

Dawn laughs, "Oh, I know plenty. And if you keep upsetting the status quo, you keep pissing off my officers, then I've got no reason to allow you to keep that baby with you when you're obviously a bad influence on her."

It had left her with a cold feeling in her stomach and a renewed sense of urgency.

"You're not strong enough."

Bullshit. Dawn has no idea just how strong Beth is.

Which is why they make a plan, her and Noah, and a key in Dawn's office. They don't ask anyone else to come, and no one else seems to notice what is going on or begs for a release so it all works out in the end. They wait for the right moment and then the right moment is here. Beth lets Noah have Judith for this because thinking of the noise she might make scares Beth. She watches Noah distract Dawn, and has to grit her teeth a little when the woman presses a kiss to Judith's forehead. Noah makes eye contact with her before he leads Dawn away under whatever pretense he has come up with. She waits until there is no one in the hallway and slips into the office, leaving the door open just a little bit so she knows if someone is coming.

She turns the corner and steps back with a gasp. It's the one-armed girl, Joan, lying in a pool of her own blood. Beth's eyes follow the trail to the fresh cuts on the other girl's wrists and she swallows heavily when she realizes that this is what it would have looked like, all those months ago on the farm. Joan's fingers are coated in blood and there's some writing on the floor that she had obviously completed just before she died. Beth has to lean in close to read the letters in the fading light.

*FUCK YOU*

The last two letters are a little scraggly and not as clear as the others and she knows that they were written as Joan faded out of this world. There's no wound on her head, and Beth understands what the other girl had been hoping to accomplish.

Well, who was she to stand in the way of destiny?

She doesn't try to damage Joan's brain, doesn't try to do anything, just lets her rest in the peace that she so clearly wanted. All they need is the key, and they'll be home free.

*Ha, that rhymes.*

Sometimes you have to find the joy in the little things these days.

She looks through the cabinets, through the desk, through everything she can reach. She has to step carefully around Joan's body and make sure that she doesn't put her feet anywhere near the blood so she doesn't leave a trace of her presence. She finally finds what she needs in the very back of the last draw she rifles through, her fingers closing triumphantly on the cold hard metal of the key ring. Her grin fades as she straightens and realizes who is standing in the doorway.

Gorman's by the door, which is now shut and locked.

"Hope I'm not interrupting anythin' important."

Beth tries to sidestep him, tucks her head down so she doesn't make eye contact. "Dawn needed something."

He braces an arm against the wall next to them, preventing Beth from going any further, "See now," he tells her, speaking to her like someone would to a child who needs to be taught a lesson, "I was just with Dawn, and I've been with her all morning practically, so I know that's not the case. So you're in here without her knowing." Beth doesn't like the look on his face, "It's okay, though, she doesn't have to know."

He says some other stuff to her, but Beth's ears are ringing with the panic and it doesn't register in her brain. What does register is the sound of Joan reanimating behind her, the feeling of the glass jar beneath her fingertips, the rush of adrenaline as she smashes the jar over Gorman's head. Then nothing, no feeling, no hearing, as Joan devours him. He doesn't even have a chance to scream. The first thing she had gone for was his throat.

Beth takes his gun and leaves him there to be eaten.

*Joan finally got what she wanted*

Just not exactly how she had wanted it. It hadn't escaped Beth's notice that she had killed herself in Dawn's office.

"Hey Beth."

She had somehow ended up in the hallway, keys tucked into her bra, gun tucked into her waistband. She feels completely calm, like nothing had happened.

"Gorman was waiting for you in your office."

She doesn't wait for a response, but she can't keep the smile off of her face as she walks away.

She's still smiling as she straps Judith to Noah's chest.

He protests of course, wants to know why she's trusting him with her most precious thing in the world. "Can I be honest with you?" she asks.

"Yes."

"It's not that I trust you. It's that I've been out, and you haven't, and I'm a better fighter and shot than you are." She gives a purposeful glance down to his leg, and he shuts up.

It makes her skin crawl not to have Judith in her arms, but she knows it's the best way if they have to fight their way out. Noah was taller than Beth anyhow, and Judith had a good view. Beth had felt bad about it, but she had stolen a little bit of Benadryl from the medicine cabinet, slipped in some mashed food, and now Judith was out like a light on Noah's back. She pressed a kiss to Judith's head, inhaling her scent and feeling the wisps of hair beneath her lips.

She's still smiling as they slide down the makeshift rope Noah had fashioned together. Her first, Noah second.

She's still smiling as they run through the dark of the underbelly of the hospital.

She's still smiling as she fumbles through the key ring to find the right one.

She's still smiling even as she pops off a few shots into walkers that get too close.

She's still smiling even as they force her face into the pavement because Noah has slipped through the fence with her baby on his back.

All of the noise had startled Judith awake, and her baby was crying, but her baby was on the other side of the fence now and that was all that mattered. Noah is holding on to the fence, looking at her helplessly, but she just smiles and jerks her head. She's still smiling as he hoists the carrier up higher on his back and disappears behind some vehicles in the distance. She doesn't let the tears fall until she can no longer see them as she's hauled to her feet and dragged back inside. But she's still smiling, even as Dawn's fist comes crashing into her face.

Judith being safe is worth the beating that she takes.

## Chapter 19



## Day 513 Post Outbreak, Day 5 in Grady Memorial

Beth wakes up slowly, feeling like a diver surfacing for air. It's not the first time this has happened, she's awake enough to understand that. This same thing happened only a few days ago. Everything is blurry like a film is covering her eyes. She reaches her hand up to rub them and lets out a curse when she hits herself in the face with a cast over her wrist. Well, she tries to reach her hands up that is. This time she's stopped by the fact that she's been cuffed to the bed. That's not the only problem. The other problem is everything is more out of focus than last time, and she feels even worse. Last time it had felt like she had simply been hit by a car, this time it had run her over more than once. Her fingers touch something rough on her cheek, then her forehead and dammit if there aren't more slices running across her cheeks and forehead and more stitches holding her skin together. She's in a clean pair of scrubs and wonders who changed her, shuddering at the thought of one of the male officers being the ones to see her naked.

She winces and tries not to let out a moan, and it's then that she realizes that one of her eyes is swollen shut and that's why the world is out of focus.

The only people to see she naked in her whole life were....well, now that she thinks about it and thinks about the life on the road before the prison, it's more people than she thought. But all of it had been under her own consent. This wasn't, and it bothered her just a little, almost as if she could feel fingers she didn't know stroking up and down her skin at this very moment. She knows there's no one there, and that it's most likely left over sensation from the beating, but it still makes her feel a little sick to her stomach.

Even with how poorly she is feeling though, she smiles.

Judith is safe.

That's all that mattered.

Her baby was safe.

Beth wonders how pathetic she looks with a bloody grin (she can still taste blood on her teeth) and a bruise-covered face.

The door creaks open, and she jerks up as far as she can, relaxing only when she sees that it's Dr. Edwards. His expression shifts to surprised when he sees that she's awake.

"You're awake."

Way to state the obvious.

He looks her over before pulling a key out of his pocket and unlocking the cuffs.

"Are you allowed to do that?" She's not complaining, she really wants to know. Will it get him in trouble? She almost hopes that it might.

He glances at her as he pulls her arm with the cast closer to him to examine her arm. "This isn't the first time you've woken up. You clocked one of the orderlies earlier, gave them quite a shiner. We just didn't want you hurting anyone else."

She doesn't want to lie to him, "If they don't let me out of here, I can't promise you anything."

His gaze is serious. "You owe so much you'll never pay it off. You let two residents escape, got two cops killed and nearly killed Joan, and you think you can earn your way out, seriously?"

She smirks, "Who said anything about earning my way out? You say that like I believe in Dawn's horseshit system. I don't."

"So how do you think you're getting out then?"

"My people will find me. We're family, and we always find each other." she gives him a long look, "The people in here seem to have forgotten what that's like."

"The people in here never had that." He sets her arm down. "The bone was shifted during your beating, I had to recast it. As long as nothing else like that happens, you should be fine. Your knee should heal more quickly than your arm."

Beth looks down at her right knee, which had twisted abruptly as she was shoved into the pavement. Even through the scrub pants she could tell that it was swollen.

"If the swelling doesn't go down I may have to drain it, but we'll wait and see. I'd ice it if I could, but that's not the world we live in anymore."

He's right. The sun is going down in the sky more steadily now, fading from brilliant daylight into the more orangey tones of the evening. This was her fifth day without Daryl, and it was her first day without Judith.

Her first day without Judith. Judith, who had been at her side since the day the baby was born. Beth's heart cracks in two. A tear leaks down her cheek, and Dr. Edwards pretends not to notice as he slips back out the door.

What else would she have to do?

Who else would she have to kill?

What price would she have to pay to escape this place?

Whatever had to be done, whatever the cost, Beth would pay it a thousand times over. She eases herself off the bed and over to the mirror next to the little bathroom. What she sees there makes her gasp.

She knew how sore she felt and she remembers bits and pieces from what had happened the night before, but seeing it is a whole new experience.

Battered and bruised, her once-vibrant features now bore the cruel imprints of a merciless attack. Swollen eyes, one completely shut, were tinged with the deep hues of purple and black. A trail of crimson trickled from a split lip, staining her pale skin with a stark reminder

of the violence. She could taste the blood in her mouth and her teeth were stained pink. Her disheveled hair clung damply to her forehead, strands escaping the braid she had put in only the day before. Even as she felt a cold breath of despair wash over her at the sight of her own injuries, there lingers a stubborn defiance in her gaze.

She can't be hopeless now. Hopeless means helpless, means depression, and a steak knife, and she's been down that road before. She's going to get out of here, she has to hold onto that fact, or she's got nothing left.

She's Beth Greene, and her Daddy taught her better than this.

She smiles.

There's noise outside, the now-familiar sound of the officers bringing in yet another victim from the streets. She limps over to the door, pushing it open ever so slightly to peer outside. It's getting darker more quickly thanks to the seasons changing, and with fewer windows than the rooms the hallways are dark since there is only one lamp to light them. The officers push a gurney down the hallway and past her door.

Beth freezes, struggles to keep a straight face and not show any kind of care or concern as they continue down the hallway.

Edwards is looking at her.

Dawn (who is on the other end of the hallway) is looking at her.

Everyone seems to be looking at her.

She can't show weakness. She can't.

But inside, her heart is screaming.

She's rejoicing.

She's actually got a shot of getting out of here.

Thanks to this.

Merle.

## Chapter 20

## Day 509 Post Outbreak, Day 1 Without Beth

"Well, lookie here, if it ain't my baby brother!"

He's dreaming. He's fuckin' lost it, that's what this is. He's gone completely off the deep end. Him and Beth had talked before, about how she used to love those white-trash romances where people 'made love' and sometimes they died and the other person in the relationship had gone mad w' the grief or some insane bullshit like that. That's what must be happening to him, because there's no other explanation for why there's someone that looks exactly like his brother standing in front of him just now.

Merle's got his knife-arm strapped on and a pistol at his side and he's looking beyond Daryl to some of the assholes behind him.

"Look here now," he says in that all-too-familiar Merle way of his, "Consider everything claimed."

The man directly behind Daryl lowers his weapon with a curse. The man in front of Daryl smirks.

"Now, now, Len, you know the rules. And that's the rule. Merle says claimed, and so...." The older man trails off, as if he was waiting for an answer. It doesn't come. His face turns to stone. "And so?"

Behind Daryl, Len lets out a huff. "It's claimed."

Merle smiles.

Daryl lowers his bow, slow and uncertain, but he still lowers it. And then Merle is on him, clapping him on the back, his face tight with emotion that he can't let spill out.

"Good ta see ya, baby brother." Merle looks around suddenly, a question in his eyes. "Where's Sunshine?"

Daryl doesn't say anything.

## Day 510 Post Outbreak, Day 2 without Beth

Merle tells him all about the rules here, but Daryl doesn't care.

Sure, he's grateful to have his brother back, had missed him something fierce and dreamed about having him back (although of course he could never let Beth know that he was dreamin' about shit like that). And havin him back is something good, something that gives him a reason to hope. But it's not like havin' Beth back. So he follows Merle, follows this Joe guy and traces footprints for him.

They're trying to find someone who killed their friend, apparently, but Daryl privately thinks that whoever did it did the world a favor. He sleeps next to Merle with his fist wrapped around his bow and tries to deal with the bullshit rules this group has and tries to stick it out so that he can keep moving forward.

That's all he can do.

"Where's Sunshine?" Merle asks him again, "And the Lil' Asskicker?"

Daryl looks at him with dead eyes, "Gone."

Merle doesn't ask again.

## Day 511 Post Outbreak, Day 3 without Beth

They walk for hours, following tracks. Following imprints in the dirt. With Merle beside him, Daryl could almost pretend that this was life before the Turn. The only problem is now there's a hole in his chest, a Beth-and-Judith sized hole that he knows no one and nothing can fill except the two people it was made for. Even so, he hasn't moved this much in a long time without a break and he's not ashamed to admit to himself that his bow is growing heavier and heavier on his back.

It's almost natural to fall into step behind Merle. Two steps behind, one slightly to the right. Just like old times.

They walk until it grows dark. They were going to stop, but then Joe spots a line of smoke sticking up from the nearby tree line.

"Hey bowman?"

Daryl turns to Joe.

"How far off do you think that is?"

Daryl eyes the smoke line with a critical eye, feeling sorry for whoever is at the end of it. "Mile, maybe two. Not that far."

They creep through the woods until they find a little cabin, light shining from within. They crouch down behind the trees to watch, and the door opens and shuts to let out a steady stream of shadowy figures. They're lit up from the light within the cabin and Daryl can't make out what they look like. Slowly, slowly, they all circle around the cabin. Joe is the most daring of them all, scoots close to the little porch and waits for the next person to come out. When they do, and they stand on the little step, that's when Joe strikes.

Only problem is the person he snatches is wearing an all-to-familiar cowboy hat.

'Shit," Merle cusses, "Not Officer Friendly."

No, Not Officer Friendly. Officer Friendly's kid.

'Fuck."

Their family spills out of the cabin, draw like moths to flame by Joe's call and Carl's scream. Joe's got a gun pressed to his head and a hand wrapped around his throat.

"Fuck."

Daryl has to try and stop this. He knows that any second now Rick will lower his weapon (because of course he would, it's Carl for fucks sake) and the rest will follow.

Tyrese. Maggie. Glenn. Carol. Bob. Sasha. Michonne. Others he didn't recognize. Family now too, he supposed. Everyone became family eventually with this group.

His heart is going one-hundred miles an hour.

He tries. He hollers at Joe, steps where everyone can see him even in the dying light, can see him and hear him and know he's alive, that he made it. He tries to tell Joe, tell them that they're good people, they're family, they can make this work.

It all falls on deaf ears.

"This man killed our friend. You say he's good people. See that right there i'...i'...is a lie," Joe stuttered.

Shit. The rules. The rules say don't lie.

"Teach him, boys."

But they don't get to lay a hand on him. Anybody that moves close gets gutted by Merle's favorite arm. His older brother has his teeth bared like an animal and his pistol pointed at Joe.

"Think it's time for some new rules," his older brother says, "Don' you?"

Joe doesn't get a chance to answer. He twitches in the wrong direction and Merle drops him where he stands.



## **Day 512 Post Outbreak, Day 4 without Beth**

They get a reunion, get a moment of happy, get to hear about Terminous and how that was the explosion that Beth and Daryl had heard all those days ago.

He notices Bob missing a leg, gets told a nice story about cannibals at Terminous and how some of the survivors had caught up to them before they were able to put them all down. Had them tied up and ate Bob right in front of them, but they got what was coming to them in the end.

Anybody who goes against their family always gets what's coming to them in the end.

And then Daryl has to tell them.

He has to tell Maggie he lost Beth.

He has to tell Rick that he lost Judith.

He has to tell them that it's all his fault.

He goes to bed with tear-stained cheeks and tries to pretend that it's okay that Rick and Maggie won't look him in the eye.

Tries to pretend that the Beth-and-Judith shaped hole means nothing. But he can't pretend that. He can't.

There's a preacher-man with them now, and he tries to speak to Daryl after, tries to give him some comfort, but Daryl was a Dixon and the only religion he truly believed in was the fact that there was a hell.

He's going to burn for this.

"They're just gone."

## Day 513, Day 5 without Beth

"You're a selfish bitch, you know that Maggie?"

Saying it is worth it. It's worth the slap he gets.

"Beth is alive out there somewhere, is waiting for us to find her, she's scared and alone and you're gonna go off on some suicide mission?"

Worth the slap to the other cheek as well.

No one tries to break them apart, everyone seems to understand this has to happen.

"Figures. Should've known you already gave up on her."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Means you're a selfish bitch, just like I said."

Maggie turns away from him and then, climbs into the truck they had managed to scavenge and that the big red-headed fucker, Abraham, had claimed for his mission to "save the world". Daryl had snorted at that one. The world is more than beyond saving, the world is what it is now and people just have to accept that. Anybody doing anything else was just being stupid, just following themselves.

"We saw the signs, Maggie!"

That makes her stop, and give a half-turn so she's looking at him, one leg in the truck and one leg out.

"We saw the signs."

Standing on the side of the road, everyone else is looking at him. He relishes this moment.

"Glenn," he says, drawing it out, "Glenn, go to Terminus. What about Beth? Huh? What about Beth Maggie?"

It gives him some sick satisfaction knowing that tears are streaming down her face as they drive away.

They press on. It's all they can do now. There's a town up ahead, Grady, where they can get supplies and maybe a couple of vehicles. It's a risk, they all know it's a risk, but there's so few things left outside of the towns that it's just going to have to be a risk that's worth it.

They've got to keep moving, keep searching, keep doing something.

Anything.

He's going to find them.

He's going to find his girl.

## Chapter 21

## Day 514 Post-Outbreak, Day 6 in Grady Memorial

All it takes to get Merle the medicine he needs is a shard of glass and the gentle reminder to Dr. Edwards of what it felt like to piss his pants.

Course, the fact that Merle is strong and there really isn't much to fixing him except making sure he's got some fluids and keeping an eye on him in case there's any internal injuries. Beth wonders what will happen when they find out that Merle is a Dixon and he's not like the rest of the people they usually pick up, that he's not going to cower down and bow to their whims.

She smirks.

That will be fun to see.

The fact that Beth looks like some half-dead street fighter also inspires some healthy fear in the patients and the officers in Grady.

She doesn't let anybody else touch Merle, and maybe that's a mistake, but she needs something else to fight for and now she's got it and she's holding on tight and she won't let go. She does let them take his knife arm though, because it would be more than a little stupid to fight them on that when they still have more guns. She gets a bowl of warm water and a rag from the closet and scrubs the grime and the dirt of the outside off of him and stuffs him gently into a clean set of scrubs. After that, it's just a matter of sitting and waiting.

She doesn't have to wait long.

Merle pops his eyes open and is instantly awake, sitting up suddenly with the practice of someone who grew up with Will Dixon for a daddy and who knows when there's eyes on him. He reaches out, for help, for a weapon, Beth isn't sure. For something. She watches carefully as he blinks a few times, shakes his head to clear it. And then his eyes fix onto her and he falls back onto the pillow like she swung on him. Beth wants to laugh if it wouldn't alert the people in the hallway that something had changed.

She wonders what it looks like to him.

It looks like an angel with a halo standing at the edge of his bed. It looks like the desperate hope that's been lit up in his brother's eye for the past few days. It looks like a girl who's had the shit beat out of her and somehow she's still standing. She's got a hard set to her mouth and a determination in her eye that makes his heart feel full.

"Hey Merle," she says, like they were never apart and like it hasn't been months. Her tone is breezy and light like nothing is wrong, like they aren't prisoners. He's not stupid, he remembers the car crashing into him.

Damn sons of bitches dented his knife-arm. Fuckers.

They're going to get out of here. Maybe not tonight, and maybe not tomorrow, but they're going to get free sooner rather than later.

"Hey, Sunshine."

Everything is right in the world.

People look at girls like Beth and all they see is blonde and pretty but Merle trained Beth himself and he knows just how dangerous she is. Beneath that small frame is a backbone of steel and determination like nothing he's ever seen before or ever will see again.

"Daryl?"

"Was alright, last I saw him." Beth watches a crafty smile wipe itself across her brother's (for what else could he be) face. "Right after we found some little Afro kid carrying a really white baby."

Something in Beth breaks and she didn't bother to hide the tears that spill out of her eyes. She presses the tips of her fingers to her mouth to hold in the sobs that want to escape.

"They made it?"

She hadn't let herself really think about it, but there had been that nagging fear in the very back of her mind that had planted itself, stuck around, and bothered her in the darkest moments of the past few nights.

She could put that fear to rest now, and she never had to think of it again.

"We found them." Merle continues, "We found them all." He gestures between them, "We're the only ones missing now, but they know where you are, and they're coming. They're coming Beth."

Daryl's coming for her.

## Chapter 22

## Day 514 Post-Outbreak, Day 6 in Grady Memorial

"So, what happened to you?"

Merle sighs and leans back against the bed.

"When it happened, I was digging some more graves out back. I saw the Governor, saw what he did to yer' daddy." He gives her a sympathetic look.

Beth sniffs quietly, trying to keep the well of emotion from falling out of her eyes.

"Wasn't nothin' I could do, and I knew that. So I booked it out the back when they drove through the fence, and that was that. Thought I saw you and Daryl, tried to pick up anyone's trail, but there was so many dead around that the tracks got covered, then it rained, and I think I almost found ya a time or two, but there was nothin' to it. Didn't have no supplies and I walked in circles for a few weeks. Found this one group, called themselves Claimers and had all these shit rules, but then we found Daryl and, well, Claimer's had some ideas we didn't terribly like and we took care o' them. Found the rest, got hit by a car when we started into the city, and well, you know the rest."

Yeah, she knows the rest.

"Ya don' have to tell anything about what happened to you, Sunshine. Daryl tol' me everythin' and then some, I reckon."

Beth is grateful. She really doesn't feel much like talking. They don't have the time anyway. Beth has chores, much as she loathes them and sees no purpose in them. But they have to keep up appearances and she can't give away how hopeful she feels. So she goes to the orderly closet, gets the mop and the bucket designated to her, and starts work on the floor outside Merle's room. Merle, who is still injured enough to play half-dead. She dunks the mop in the warm, soapy water, and slides it back and forth against the floor. Dawn is there, watching her, which she seems to be doing a lot more often lately. She's speaking with one of the officers, but Beth can't make out what they're saying.

She might not be able to hear what Dawn is saying, but she can hear gunshots cutting through the air as clear as day. She smirks.

Dawn looks angry. It strangely makes Beth happy.

"Find it," Dawn demands, "Track it down. Bring whoever it is in."

"Yes, ma'am."

A few hours pass. Dawn grows more and more agitated by the minute. Beth is cleaning her room and watches as the woman hops on one of the battery charging bikes and pedals furiously.



"Shephard, Lamson, what's your twenty."

No response.

"I need statues on that gunfire, what's your twenty?"

No response.

"Licari, do you copy?"

No response.

"Does anybody copy?"

You guess it, no response.

Dawn sets (more like slams) her walkie down onto the table next to her with a curse.

Beth can't help herself. "Somethin' wrong?"

Dawn shoots her a dirty look but can't hide the worry in her eyes, "They don't always radio back, and it drives me crazy."

Beth finishes wiping a picture frame she's been holding on to for a minute and goes to set it down on Dawn's desk.

"No Beth, not there. Put it up, there, by the badges."

Dawn keeps looking at her for a minute before she stops pedaling and stands up. "You know that man, the new one who just came in, don't you?"

Beth doesn't bother to respond and tries to keep her expression as blank as possible.

"Doesn't matter, I suppose. He'll fall in line, just like the rest." She watches Beth's face closely, looking for any sign of emotion, but sees none. "You don't like me, I get that. I don't need you to like me, just like I don't need them to love me. You'll learn some day that you don't need anybody to love you, but you have to have their respect. Otherwise, one day you'll need backup and no one comes for you. And then what? Everyone suffers."

No one suffers. Not in her family, because this sick twisted version of respect that Dawn holds in her mind isn't something they know. They know real love, and friendship, and how to take care of each other, and it doesn't matter if they're fighting or not. When they're needed, they come.

Something in her gut tells her that this is them, that the reason the officers aren't calling back in is a message for her and Merle (even if they didn't intend for it to be so quite just yet) and that they were going to be out of this place by the end of the day. Or maybe tomorrow. It was the afternoon now.

## Chapter 23

## Day 514 Post-Outbreak, Day 6 in Grady Memorial

Beth knows it's only been six days, that it really isn't a long amount of time, and that she should be grateful for every single day she gets in this world, but to be honest she's tired of waiting. She's tired of a lot of things. She had a taste of freedom the day Noah got out with Judith before she was knocked back into the dirt.

In the old world, she would have been diagnosed with some depressive disorder, given anti-depressant medications, and sent to therapy because her family would have done anything possible to make her well.

But that was the old world, and this was the new world, and she just had to try and handle these feelings of helplessness and sadness and tiredness all on her own. She brings Merle an early dinner and finds him taking a nap. That's good, he needs it and needs to be better than he is right now with obviously bruised ribs and sore...everything. She lets him sleep, sneaks down to Dawn's office, grabs the key to the elevator, and that's where Dawn finds her only a few minutes later. Beth leans her head against the open door and lets out a sigh.

"You gonna jump?"

Why would Beth jump when she knows what's coming for her? When she knows that she's going to see her baby again soon, see Daryl again soon, and find a home again soon (hopefully). But Dawn doesn't know anything about any of this, and so Beth has to reassure her.

"I wanted to be alone," Beth says lowly, "You left your elevator key on your desk."

"Well, I know you're not going anywhere."

Oh, Beth is. Dawn just doesn't know it yet. Still, Beth can't resist rising to the bait. "Neither are you." She slides around slowly, turning to face Dawn fully. "You keep telling yourself that you have to do whatever it takes just until this is all over. But it isn't over. This is it, this is who you are, and what this place is until the end."

Dawn's face grows hard. "This place saved you."

"Bullshit!" Beth jerks herself up and meets Dawn toe-to-toe. "They hit me on purpose, just like they did Noah, and Merle, and all the others too, I'm sure. Fuck that shit. You didn't save us, you took us. You took us, and you have no idea what you've done to yourself in the process."

"I saved you, Beth, twice." She steps closer to Beth, "The first time, and then with Gormon and Jeffries."

"People die in this world, Dawn. They died, and that's all there is to it, and maybe it wouldn't have happened if you had their respect."

"I had their respect!"

"Bullshit."

"I found the smashed jar, you know, and I took care of it. You're a cop killer."

"And you're fucking fooling yourself if you think you're still a cop. I know a cop. Rick Grimes. He's a good man, not this twisted thing you've turned yourself into. He knows what it means to protect and serve, and he knows when to admit he's wrong. But you're so blinded by your own goddamn arrogance that you can't fucking see the world for what it is now. Hell in a hand basket it what it is, and we just have to live in it."

"There's ways that things have to happen in here, don't you get that?"

Beth doesn't get a chance to respond. A door beyond them closes, and there's an officer at the end of the hall who has very obviously heard every single word.

The next few moments pass in a haze. Words are exchanged, Dawn pulls her gun, then it's flying down the hallway and Beth gets to smile while Dawn gets the shit beat out of her. But she can't let it go on forever, she needs to see this through, needs Dawn to be in charge so that this can all be over. So she punches him in the back, right in the spot where his kidney should be. She takes the responding blow with a grin, blood spurting from her freshly re-split lip and coating her teeth to turn her grin ferocious. It only takes another minute to pull O'Donnell off of Dawn and shove him down the shoot.

She kneels down beside Dawn, who flinches back at the crazed look on Beth's face.

"Let's be very clear," Beth whispers, "You're not protecting me, you're protecting you. You're using me to get rid of your problems, using other people to do all your dirty work for you. You're not a survivor, Dawn, you're nothing but a user. You'd never make it out there, but I have, and I will again. You're missing officers? That's my people. That's Noah, and all the rest, and they're coming for me."

She looks Dawn dead in the eye. "They're coming for *you*."

## Chapter 24

## Day 514 Post-Outbreak, Day 6 in Grady Memorial

Beth isn't around when it finally happens.

One of the orderlies tosses her a new set of clothes, actual clothes and not a set of scrubs. They give her a pair of men's jeans and a larger shirt as well, and that's how she knows that it's over. She knows how her family works, what they would've done to get here.

A life for a life.

The missing officers.

It's Edwards who comes to get Beth, leads her back down to Merle's room and watches passively as Merle staggers to his feet. In the end, Beth ends up sliding herself under his arm and letting him use her as a crutch. There's a wheelchair right there, but Dr. Edwards slides it backwards and not forwards and Beth gets it. They aren't part of this hospital, not anymore, not that they ever actually were. It's fine. They're getting out and that's all that matters.

They meet them in a hallway. One of the cleared sections of the hospital. Dawn and four other officers are already lined down one end of it, preventing Beth and Merle from going any further. There's a set of brown double doors on the other end, and Beth can see movement beyond the glass. Her breath and her heartbeat quickens, and Merle gives her shoulder a squeeze. Beth taps him with her cast, twice, and knows that Merle understands. One of the officers has Merle's knife arm tucked into their belt and Beth watches her brother-in-law eye it enviously.

"Don't worry," she whispers, "We're not leaving here without it."

A shadowy figure stops just behind the door and gives a nod. Dawn makes the officers put their guns away, and then the doors open to reveal Rick, Sasha, Tyrese, Noah.

And Daryl.

Beth's breath lets out of her in a whoosh.

"Easy there, Sunshine," Merle lightly teases her.

They've got two of the missing officers with them, but Beth can't remember their names. Why should she? Their names mean nothing.

"They haven't been harmed."

Rick's voice washes over her, and for the first time Beth really feels like it's going to be alright. It's going to be fine. They're going to get out of here, they're going to be free.

Dawn looks confused, "Where's Lamson."

Dead, if he's lucky.

"Rotters got him," the female officer confirms.

"We saw it go down." the male officer adds.

Beth watches as her family tenses up, can see the telling twitch that Daryl gives. "Rotters got him." isn't what actually happened. Good.

She can't take her eyes off Daryl, watches his expression change when he catches sight of her face and sees the bruises and the abuse beaten into it. Everyone seems to be looking at her face, and she can practically feel their tempers rise. She gives a small shake of her head, begging them silently not to mess this up when they're so close to the end of all this mess. God, she just wants to kiss him.

"Easy, girl," Merle tells her again, and it's then that Beth realizes that she had been leaning forwards on the balls of her feet. The only reason she hadn't darted down the hallway was Merle's weight on her shoulder.

"Oh."

It's only been a few seconds.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Dawn continues, "He was one of the good guys."

There are no good guys, not in here at least.

"One of yours, for one of mine."

Rick nods.

"Move." And then Daryl is walking toward her.

But of course Dawn won't let her go first. She makes one of the officers shoulder Merle's burden and walk him forward as the two prisoners swap sides slowly, Daryl pulls Merle to him, shoulders his weight and walks back toward the group quickly. Dawn grabs Beth by the shoulder, and everyone's eyes are facing front, and no one sees Beth reach to the side and slowly slide Merle's knife arm out from the officers belt. She tucks it into her side quickly, sucking in a breath. No one notices. She lets the breath out.

It's her turn now. Dawn's got her by the arm, pulling her forward down the hall. It's Rick who walks forward with the other officer this time, trades him for her. He nods at Beth, his eyes darkening with anger as he takes in her injuries with a more critical gaze. This man, the father of her adopted child (she doesn't know how else to describe Judith, not really) cups her face gently, murmuring an apology when she winces and presses a kiss to her forehead, slides his hand down to her shoulder as he pushes her forward.

Towards Daryl.

"I'm glad we could work this out."

"Yeah."

They're free.

"Now I just need Noah."

Fuck.



## Chapter 25

## Day 514 Post-Outbreak, Day 6 without Beth

They hole up in a church for a while. It's a little thing right at the edge of the city. Daryl sees the preacher-man's eyes tear up and ignores him. They hunker down, dig their heels in. They need supplies, need things to move on. He needs Beth, but he's not getting that anytime soon so might as well press on. He's got Carol, and Merle, and that's going to have to be enough for him for however long he's got left to live.

The Beth-and-Judith hole isn't going to be filled anytime soon.

They are just gone.

They go out, the three of them. Him, Merle, Carol. Head out into the city looking for supplies, scurrying up and down allies like rats in the dark looking for something, anything worth using. Worth taking back to the group.

They're inching down a road when Carol finally breaks the silence.

"You got out with Beth, after? And the baby?"

"Yeah." it's more of a grunt then a response.

"Just the three of you?"

"Yeah."

"You save her?"

Daryl's head whips around and he glares at the woman he normally calls friend, "She saved herself," he snapped. He takes a breath, pulls himself back before continuing, "We were out there for a while, just the three of us. We got cornered, they got in front of me. And now they're gone."

"Ya did all ya could, Daryl." Merle tells him gently. (Well, as gently as Merle Dixon can say it), "I'm sure she's fine."

Daryl looks back over at Carol, "What about you?" It's the only apology that he knows how to give, and he knows that Carol understands.

"It was me, Tyrese, and Mika n' Lizzie for a while."

Mika n' Lizzie weren't with the group when they found each other. Daryl doesn't ask, and Carol doesn't offer up the information. He understands.

They wiggle through a chained door, one at a time, Carol first, then the brothers. When Daryl straightens up there's a black kid in front of him with a gun pointed to Carol's chest, standing

next to a tent pitched in the hallway shaking with a walker inside. He's got a heavy bag on his back and balls of steel to point a weapon at them. Daryl's grip on his crossbow tightens.

"Daryl," Carol says softly, "Don't."

"Ya gotta sack on you, kid." Merle says menacingly.

"Look, no one has to get hurt. I just need weapons, that's all. So please, lay down your crossbow and back up."

Daryl complies.

The kid nods. "Sorry about this," he eyes Daryl and Merle up and down, "You look tough. Sorry about this." He slices a hole into the moving tent and limps off, murmuring quietly the whole time. "It's alright, it's gonna be alright, it's gonna be alright."

The time it takes for them to put down the two walkers that came out of the tent is just enough time for the kid to escape and chain the door shut behind him. They go after him, they argue with each other.

"I'm not the person I used to be anymore Daryl, and neither are you."

They end up finding a van, getting locked inside, tipping themselves off a bridge. They're going in circles and they all know it, but what else can they do? They can't afford to go back empty-handed. They scour a few more buildings for something, anything, but they keep coming up empty. As luck would have it though, the last building they search is the one where they hit the jackpot. They're only inside a few minutes when they hear screams, and they run down a hallway to find the kid from before trying to hold a bookcase to a door filled with walkers.

Daryl eyes him gleefully. "Leave him. He left us, leave him."

"No," the kid calls out, "Please no, you don't understand!"

But Daryl is already turning away and Merle and Carol will follow him.

"God I get it, leave me if you have to, but for the love of God, please just take the baby!"

Daryl spins back around, watches the kid's eyes and how they track to the corner of the room where the bag he had been carrying earlier was set down. It was squirming just a little. Daryl runs, slips, slides towards the bag, yanks it open, and pulls out a squirming blue-eyed beauty that makes his heart catch in his throat.

"Oh god," he sobs out, unashamed, "Oh god, Merle!"

Merle is a Dixon and knows just what his brother means. He darts around the other side of the bookshelf, shoves his knife-arm through the door quick as a flash, taking care of the three or four walkers that are pressing up against it. Carol is kneeling next to Daryl now, and they're pressing kisses to Judith's forehead, tears streaming down their faces.

"Well, I'll be a sum-bitch."

"Where's her mama," Daryl finally chokes out after a few minutes, "Where's Beth?"

"She got us out, got us both out, but they took her back again."

"Who took her?"

"Cops, at the hospital. They take people, it's their thing, what they do. Make you owe them and you spend the rest of your short life paying them back with your labor. Beth came a few days ago, I've been there a while. She got us out."

"Course she did." Daryl smirks through his tears. He's happy. In this moment, he's happy.

The moment doesn't last long. Merle scouts ahead, gets hit, gets taken, and him and Carol take Noah back with them to the church the rest were holed up in. Rick could've been knocked over with a feather and Carl won't let go of Judith. Then they're back in the middle of the city, hunting down cops, preparing to make a trade.

Then they're there.

Then she's there. Their eyes meet and he can't look away, she can't look away. She's bruised and she looks like shit and she's never been more goddamn beautiful in his life. He's almost jealous that Rick is standing in front of him, that Rick gets to touch her first. Daryl watches with the quiet jealousy as Rick hugs her, kisses her on the forehead. But Beth is looking at him the whole time. And

But then she's next to him and he thinks that maybe, just maybe, it's over now. His arm wraps around her shoulders and that's it. It's all okay now. He can finally relax. He can finally breathe.

"Glad we could work things out," Dawn tells Rick.

"Yeah."

He doesn't like the feeling that's settling in his stomach.

"Now I just need Noah. And then you can leave."

Rick's lips pull back in a snarl. "That wasn't part of the deal."

"Noah was my ward. Beth took his place and I'm losing her, so I need him back."

"I've already paid for Noah, wouldn't you think?" Beth's tone is quiet, dangerous, and damn him if he isn't a little turned on right now. Daryl coughs lightly.

"Ma'am, please, it's not..." one of the officers tries to cut in.

"My officers put their lives on the line to find him. One of them died." Dawn cuts back.

"No, he ain't staying."

"He's one of mine. You have no claim on him!"

"No," Beth says in that same, dangerous tone, "He's not yours anymore, Dawn. Be smart, step back."

"The boy wants to go home, so you have no claim on him." Rick is ever the diplomat.

Daryl gets it. They're all sick of the bloodshed, and this was supposed to be easy and it's being anything but.

"Well, then we don't have a deal," Dawn counters.

Beth laughs, a low and cruel sound.

"The deal is done," Rick tells her.

But people like Dawn don't quit.

"It's okay. I gotta do it. I gotta do it." Noah looks at Beth, "You go, go to Judith."

"Not without you."

But he's already moving towards Dawn, already handing Rick the pistol they had given him, and Daryl lets out a sigh.

"I knew you'd be back," Dawn says in cold glee. Daryl can feel Beth tense and he would curse if he had enough time.

Beth moves, quicker than lightning, and she presses Dawn up against the wall before anyone can blink. Is that...

Yeah, she's got Merle's knife in her hands, pressing it deeper, deeper into Dawn's neck.

"You use, and you use, and you use," his girl whispers, "till you're all used up and drained out, and then what? You're nothing."

He watches, awe-struck as she gently presses the knife in. Dawn's eyes widen at the pain and the realization of what's about to happen. Daryl lets out a shout when she pulls up her gun, but Beth just grabs her by the wrist and *holds*.

"Go on," she whispers, "Do it. Nothing changes. You're done."

God, she's beautiful as she slides out the blade and lets Dawn bleed out in her arms. She steps back, lets the cop fall down to the ground, reaches into the growing pool of blood, and picks up the gun. She levels a hard look at the other officers cowering at the end of the hall. She fixates on the big one, the one they used to trade, and it's another blink of the eye and she's shot him clean through the skull.

She turns to the female, Shepherd, Daryl thinks. "It's over. You're done." Beth points down to Dawn, "She broke it. You fix it. Make it better. Make it worth it."

She turns around, and one of the confused officers raises his hand. Daryl lets out a shout, and Noah leaps in front of Beth as the gun goes off. There's blood and two bodies on the ground and Daryl is sliding down trying to figure out which of them was hit, which of them was gone, which of them was going end up in the grave he would have to dig this evening. Rick's already got his pistol in his hands, and the guy who shot is dead. The others are cowering back down the hallway, disappearing without another word.

Cowards.

Daryl doesn't want to know, doesn't want to kill himself by finding out that his world is over, that his girl is dead. But he needs to know all at the same time. Dawn is gurgling in front of him, her last few heaving breaths escaping her newly formed corpse.

Noah's moving, sitting himself up, and Daryl dies inside. Beth's eyes are closed, and he would swear that she's sleeping. There's a streak of blood down the side of her face and he pulls her head into his lap to try and wipe it off. But it's too late, it's in her hair, it's a part of her now, and it's all he's going to see when he closes his eyes each night.

Fuck.

He had her. He had her.

"Owwww." She pushes his hand away, and he jerks back in shock as her eyes open.

Daryl laughs wetly, "You scared me, Lil' Girl." He's glad that he's sitting, because his legs are so weak that he wouldn't be able to stand.

His fingers tangle in her hair and brush against the graze cutting its way across her temple. He leans down to kiss her, and everything is right in the world again.

## Chapter 26

## Day 514 Post-Outbreak

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Daryl curls himself around her, her head still in his lap while they work out the particulars. Well, while Rick works out the particulars. Beth and Daryl stay on the floor while Beth's ears stop ringing. Beth's head leans into his palm and she closes her eyes as his fingers stroke over some blood-stained strands of hair. She feels him shudder underneath her and she presses himself closer to him.

"Dammit, Beth."

"It's alright."

It is, and it isn't and she knows that. It's been nearly a week since they've seen each other, and in this new world, a week might as well be a lifetime. It's been a lifetime since she's been held like this. It's been a lifetime trapped in here with these crazy people, fighting this fight with nothing but her wits and her knowledge. She's been fighting to stay alive longer than she can remember now, and this battle with Dawn has been the hardest she ever fought. She almost went down.

Almost.

"Judith?"

"With the others."

She won.

She won.

She's looking up at him and she's taken back to a prison shower where they were both half-naked and dripping with want and god does she wish they were alone right now, because as bold as she was feeling right now she'd probably let him take her on this corridor floor, right here, right now. His eyes are a rich chocolate, darkened with want and desire and a hope that she hasn't seen in more than a few weeks.

God, she loves this man.

"Scared me, Lil Girl."

It's not the first time he's said it.

"I'm sorry."

She's really not, and they both know it, and somehow that makes this okay. Well, it's really not okay, and Beth understands that. She understands what she almost gave up just moments



ago, what she almost made him lose, made Judith lose.

She's brought back to herself when he accidentally strokes the new graze mark she's sporting. It's steadily bleeding, though not as much as it might have been. "Shit."

"Sorry, Lil Girl."

"It's alright."

And it is. The fact that she can feel just reinforces the fact that she's alive. She's alive. She made it. She won. She's not just some dead girl, and that means more to her than anything else in the world, cept maybe Judith.

"Alright, Beth?"

And there's Rick, kneeling down at her other side, eyes filled with unshed tears at the sight of her breathing.

"You ok Beth?"

"I'll be alright."

"Fuck Beth!" And there's Noah, sliding down a pool of blood to Daryl's other side, "What the fuck was that?"

Beth fixes him with a cold glare that is made all the more terrifying by the bruises that cover her face, "I paid the price for your escape," she reminds him, "Several times over, in my humble opinion. She had no right..."

"Doesn't matter what she did or didn't have a right to, Beth, you got a baby to go back to!"

She does, and that's why she did this because nothing else matters if she's not willing to do the right thing.

"Doesn' fuckin' matter." Daryl rasps out, his voice tight in a way that tells Beth they're probably going to have it out later, "It's done."

"Let's get this shit show on the road," Merle adds. He comes up behind them to yank his knife out of Dawn's neck, ignoring the blood covering the blade and putting it back where it belongs. He tightens the fastenings in the leather with a contended sigh. They all watch as Daryl heaves to his feet with Beth in his arms. He ignores her protests, her pleas to be let down, and starts walking back down the hallway they had come from. To his credit, he doesn't start grunting until he reaches the stairs. Beth fixes him with her glare.

"Ain't no trouble." He grunts again. Beth raises a single eyebrow.

"Don' give me that look, Lil Girl."

Giving up, Beth tucks her head where his neck meets his shoulder. No one is looking, the others are at least a flight above them, so she feels bold enough to press a soft kiss to his

neck. Daryl stumbles on the next step, almost dropping her.

He stops, glaring down at her little blonde, blood-streaked head. "Ain't no cause for that." he snaps.

Beth smirks, "Plenty o' cause, the way I see it."

"Move yer assess, lovebirds. Don' wanna stay in this freak show any longer than I hafta."

Merle was an inconvenience sometimes. But he was right, she couldn't wait to get out of here. To have Judith in her arms again. To find the rest of their family, to give this life a real shot, to have a home again.

But she was getting ahead of herself. One step at a time, one day at a time was all they could have in this life. Beth shifts herself slightly, tries to balance their weight a bit better so that he doesn't slip again. Beth feels him twitch above her, feels his head dip down and his lips press gently against her forehead. She reaches her free hand up to trace his face, a face she knows all too well, to find one of the scars she's mapped all along his body. It cuts right across his temple, tells a story of long ago when there was a lost little girl who never did get found and a man mistaken for one of the dead.

"What is it?" They're almost at the bottom now.

She brushes her fingers against his temple again, "We match."

She jerks slightly as he slams to a stop, looking down at her with an unfathomable expression on his face, "That's the only way we're ever gonna match, you hear me?"

Beth knows what he's talking about, she understands what he means. She tightens her grip on his shoulder. "I know."

It almost feels like a rebirth when she's finally able to be under the sun. He slides out of the door much gentler than he had slid in, cradling her closer to him as she winces from the sudden change in the light. She breathes in deeply, the scent of the dead a constant twinge in the air now. It still smells a great deal fresher than the air had inside Grady, and she takes another deep breath.

Something squeals in the distance, something mechanical. It's a sound she hasn't heard in a long time. Beth tilts her head slightly on Daryl's shoulder, the growing pounding in her head preventing her from lifting it entirely and glances up to see a firetruck. A fucking firetruck, here at the end of the world. It's not the firetruck that shocks her so much as the people climbing off of it though. Her heart catches in her throat and she closes her eyes as a few tears threaten to leak down. Then she hears Maggie scream, a sound like she's never heard before. It's like all the good in the world has been sucked up and spit back out in something terrible.

*Fuck.*

She jerks again in Daryl's arms, this time hard enough that he has to put her down or risk having the both of them be knocked over. As it is, she adrenaline is wearing off now and her knees are shaking, practically knocking together roughly. The world is spinning slightly but the emotion running through her veins makes it just a little clearer. Still, Beth has to lean back against Daryl to keep herself from falling over. Everyone in front of them freezes, but Maggie has her face in the dirt and can't see what's right in front of her face.

"Maggie."

Her sister is still sobbing in front of her, and with a surge of energy Beth forces herself forward, down, until she's able to grab Maggie's face with both of her hands and *yank*.

"Maggie!" she yells, trying to break Maggie out of whatever fit she's put herself in, "I'm okay."

There's a heartbeat, then another, then another, moments where Maggie just stares at her and everyone around them holds their breath. Then it's over, the moment is broken, and Maggie surges forward to pull Beth to her chest, breaking down into a different kind of sobbing.

"Beth," she keeps whispering, "Oh, Beth."

Beth lets it happen, lets her sister have what she needs in this moment. That is, until...

"Mama!"

Beth looks up to see Judith in Carl's arms, practically has to punch Maggie to get free of her, and nearly slams to the ground more than once before she's finally got her baby back in her arms. She sinks back down to her knees, fresh tears pouring out of her as she looks over every inch of the baby for cuts, bites, scrapes, everything and anything that might have happened in the few days that they've been apart. Carl looks shell shocked from his place on the ground, and Rick and Merle are laughing behind them, and Maggie looks confused and heartbroke at the same time, and if Beth was looking she would have seen all of it. But she wasn't looking, was too focused on kissing and holding Judith close to her.

That was it. She had her family back. Beth raises her head up to the sun, and smiles.

## Chapter 27

## Day 514 Post-Outbreak

They're sitting around a campfire, eating some possum that Daryl shot for supper when it happens.

"Thank you, Rick," Maggie says from where she's sitting, "Thank you for Beth."

Beth looks up when her name is mentioned, nearly knocking Judith off of the breast she's nursing from. "The fuck did you just say?"

Next to her, Merle tries to poorly cover up a chuckle. All the other conversation around them has died as their family, both new and old, quiets down to witness what is sure to be a spectacle.

The trip was a bust, Eugene was a liar. A good liar, a really smart liar, but still a liar. Rick had been more than a little disappointed, they all had. But that was life these days, and all they could do was take the hand they were dealt. With nothing else to do, they just added themselves to the band of misfits.

Maggie looks like she's been shot, "I was just sayin'..."

"Nah, I heard what you said," Beth snapped back, her skin seeming even paler in the firelight. Daryl was sitting just behind her, bracing himself around her like a cage. "Wanna know what's got you thinking you need to say it."

"Well, you're out, aren't you?"

"Maggie," Glenn tries to cut in, but Carol lays a hand on his arm and he falls silent.

"Yeah," Beth says in the quiet, dangerous tone of hers, "I am. I am out."

"Well," Maggie continues, "Don't you think that he needs to be thanked for that?"

"I push, and I push, and I push Daryl to keep lookin' for you, for all of you, I don't stop until there's nothing else to do to keep Judith alive, I never stop looking, I never lose hope, but you want me to thank you for something you should've done anyway?"

Maggie tries to say something, but Beth doesn't let her.

"Glenn, go to Terminous." Well, pretty sure I went to Terminous Maggie, followed the noise that you made when escaping, and that's what got me taken in the first place, so why in the fuck should I thank you for it?"

Rick looks heartbroken, "Beth, we didn't know."

"Oh I know you didn't, I know it's not really your fault, but let's get one thing straight here. I would've gotten out even if you had never come for me. I would've put her down like the sick

bitch she was anyway. I didn't need you to save me, it just made it more convenient and quick. I didn't need you Maggie, and that's a good thing, because you wouldn't have gotten there in time if I had would you?"

She looks around the campfire, "I killed the Governor. I did that. Me. I killed Dawn. I don't need anyone or anything to save me. I saved myself. And I dare anyone to say anything different."

Nobody said anything different.

It's a few minutes before somebody else says something.

"You've got a regular knight in shining armor here, Sunshine." Merle breaks the tension with a tease, "Why, he even took ole Daryl's crossbow just so he could get back to ya n' break you out."

Judith unlatches herself, clapping her hands together as she sits up, and Beth is quick to cover herself as she turns in Daryl's lap with wide blue eyes.

"You let Noah take your bow?"

Said bow is sitting just behind them, within reach in case he needs to grab it quickly. Beth glances at Noah with a small smile on her face, "It took months before he let me handle it."

Merle lets out a rough laugh at the comment, and everyone joins in as Beth turns pink with the realization of what exactly her comment can be taken as.

"Dammit Merle!" she cusses, embarrassed. Still, it's not a mean sort of cuss, and Merle knows it.

They all know it, and it's good to laugh, even if it's just for a moment.

## Chapter 28

## Day 517 Post-Outbreak

Noah's home was a bust, and now Tyrese is gone, and they're wandering in circles trying to find someplace, anyplace to call home.

Beth won't talk to Maggie, hasn't said a word to her in nearly three days and it seems to be hitting the older Green sister a lot harder than somebody would think it would. Sasha is a mess, and Bob missing his leg doesn't seem to help any. He can't do much but sit there unless someone helps him walk and they really can't spare that kind of manpower unless they're really moving.

Firetruck ran out of gas right after they buried Tyrese.

No way to go but forward.

Beth is used to this, to the moving around and scrounging for anything they could possibly use. Problem is how many people they've got to feed now, how little water they have, no destination in mind and no where near enough supplies to sustain everyone. People keep handing Beth their rations, eyeing Judith every time, and after a day or so she quits protesting. They find a white van that's got some gas in it, and they all manage to pile in but it's hotter than hell with hardly any windows and their dwindling water supply just makes it worse.

Then the van sputters to a stop as well.

"We're out." The redhead, Abraham points out.

"So then we walk." No one questions Rick.



## Day 520 Post-Outbreak

Beth can barely keep track of the days anymore. They swap carrying Judith as much as possible, swap out helping Bob as much as possible, but there's been no sign of food or water or even some goddamn rain to help them in this.

Daryl breaks off from the group to hunt, and quiet as a mouse Beth trails behind him with her pistol tucked into her pants and her knife strapped to her leg. Rick has Judith, fast asleep in her carrier so Beth feels alright leaving her.

It's a stolen moment, him pressing her up against a tree, her letting him touch her, love her, quick and quiet and everyone ignores her mussed hair because they come back with two squirrels. Skinny squirrels, but squirrels nonetheless.

It's a promise against sweat-slick skin as he gasps into your shoulder.

"We're not dead."

"We're not dead."

"You're alive."

"*We're* alive."

## Day 523 Post-Outbreak

It's a bridge with their family on either side and forty something (or possibly more) walkers in front of them that they knew they wouldn't be able to shake. It's Bob laying down on the bridge holding Judith and the rest of them putting down the dead. It's a walker that looks like Tyrese and then Sasha isn't Sasha anymore and the formation is broken and they're scrambling to catch up to the gap she left behind.

And then it's over.

"I told you to stop," Michonne hisses out.

Sasha just looks at her before sheathing her knife and walking over to Bob, waiting for Carl to grab Judith before slinging her lover's arm over her shoulder and they press on.

## Day 525 Post-Outbreak

It's a small group of cars and a bottle of whiskey that Abraham grabs and nobody stops him. It's sitting on the side of the road trying to figure out what they're eating today when three rabid dogs pop out of the woods.

Sasha puts them down, and for once there's enough meat for everyone.

Beth leans back into Daryl and watches Noah, who can't seem to stop looking at the dog collars they had tossed back onto the street. Sasha walks past the boy with some more firewood in her arms, gives him an unreadable look as she tosses it down. Beth doesn't like that look.

"Your brother," Noah says, and everyone gets quiet, "He tried to help me." He waits until Sasha makes eye contact with him. "I don't think I'm going to make it."

Now, that's just an insult. To Beth, to Tyrese, to all of it, and it shows in Sasha's eyes as her hands reach for her rifle. "Then you won't."

Beth darts up quicker than a flash, grabs the rifle before Sasha can move any further. "Don't. You. Dare."

Sasha meets her gaze with pain in her eyes, "He said it, not me."

"You do this, Tyrese died for nothing. I paid a price for nothing. Don't you dare make out sacrifices worthless."

Sasha goes back over to Bob, lays her head down in his lap, and they all pretend that they don't hear her crying.

Beth tosses Noah a piece of meat, "You're alive," she can't help but snap at him, "So be fucking alive and eat the damn meat."

He takes it without complaint.

## Day 527 Post-Outbreak

They find water in the middle of the road when they turn the next corner. Actual, filled, *clean* bottles of water. Beth nearly drops the baby when she sees it.

"What the fuck?"

Rick chastises Carl lightly for cursing, but they can see the same expression written on his face. Rick makes eye contact with Daryl, who already has his bow off and his eyes scanning the trees.

Beth presses herself to his back, her wide eyes still staring.

There's a piece of paper on top of the bottles. Beth grabs it, unfolds it, reads it.

FROM A FRIEND.

She hands it to Rick, who shows Daryl and all the rest.

Tara adjusts her rifle, eyeing the water longingly. "What else are we going to do?"

"Not this," is Rick's response, "We don't know who left it. It may be a trap."

"If it's a trap, then we're already in it. And I for one would like to think that it is indeed from a friend."

But it could be a trap, could be a posion, could be something worse than death and they all know it. This makes it no surprise when Abraham moves forward to knock the bottle out of Eugene's hand when the younger man tries to take a drink.

"We can't."

Beth knows they can't, but it doesn't stop her from eyeing the bottles with more than a little desire in her eyes. Then the skies open up, and they all laugh and tip their heads back and maybe there is a god up there still. They rush to grab something, anything to carry as much water as they can. Judith laughs, reaches her hands up to touch the water. But this world doesn't have a god anymore, and thunder soon cracks across the sky. Beth was born and raised in the south, and she knows the kind of storm that is brewing. They all know this kind of storm, the kind where the wind picks up and the rain comes down harder and sometimes you even hear the sirens that mean you're spending the night in the cellar.

But a barn works too, Beth supposes.

But it doesn't work as well as a cellar would have. It takes everyone's weight just to hold the door closed, and even after the wind passes Beth spends the night awake and curled around Judith, the sound of trees snapping making her shake just a little. Daryl's sitting up next to her, his arm around her shoulders. She leans against his shoulder and closes her eyes.

"Gonna go to sleep on me?"

"Maybe," she responds, "Gotta problem with it?"

"Nah."

Merle lets out a whistle a little later when he sees the downed trees. "Well shit, if that ain't a fucking miracle I don't know what the hell is."

Beth agrees with him.

Maybe this means they're going to be okay.

At least, that's what she thinks until Maggie and Sasha drag a man into the barn.

## Chapter 29

### Chapter Notes

Possible triggering vibes: flashback to Grady with the lollipops. Nothing mentioned in detail. Also some comments made by Beth as she tries to find out what kind of man Aaron is.

Nothing graphic, just letting you know ahead of time.

## Day 528 Post-Outbreak

They're all just sitting in the barn, going over their supplies when Maggie lets out a shout from the outside. Everyone is on edge in an instant, weapons in hand, Rick curling his hand over the baby in his lap protectively.

Beth watches as Maggie eases the door open and walks inside with Sasha and a man. A clean man, a man who looks well fed. It's not something she's used to seeing, and she tightens her hand on her knife.

"This is Aaron."

Daryl's on his feet the next moment, darting back outside to eye the tree line. Beth stalks over, grabbing the man (Aaron?) roughly by the shoulders as she runs her hands up and down his body, feeling for any hidden weapons. Maggie gives her a reproachful look, which she ignores to pull the stranger further into the barn so they can shut the door fully.

"We already took his weapons and his gear," Maggie tells her.

"But did you search him?"

Silence is her answer.

The barn door creaks as it closes all the way. Beth notices how Aaron's eyes track down to Judith, and her hold on his shirt grows tighter until he turns his attention back to her.

"Hi."

If Beth wasn't holding him, she was sure he'd try to step forward. His leg twitches, and her knife is at his throat. Judith lets out a cry behind her, but she can hear Carl mumbling to his sister and she knows that her baby is okay. The only threat is in front of her, at the end of her knife.

"It's nice to meet you," Aaron adds.

"Yer awful calm for someone with a knife to his neck."

"If Beth wanted to kill me, she would. She hasn't, so I'm assuming she won't."

"Well," she says lowly, "You know what they say about assuming." Her face tightens as what he says fully registers, "How do you know my name?"

"His weapon?" Rick wants to know.

Beth doesn't care about that right now, but the others do.

Maggie walks forward, handing him a little gun and a knife.

"He says he's got a community and wants us to audition for membership."

Beth doesn't take kindly to being ignored and pushes her blade down until there's a red line of blood flowing slowly. Aaron lets out a yelp that silences everyone else. "How the fuck do you know my name?" The realization washes over her like cold water. "He's been watching us."

The mood immediately changes, and Beth can feel the familiar heat of Merle and Daryl at her back. What do they look like to him, to this clean and fed stranger? Their ragtag band, their family. More starved than anything else, dirty, covered in weeks-old blood and sweat and tears.

A wild determination in all of their eyes, because they made it this far and they weren't about to stop now.

"I've got pictures," Aaron gasps, "In my pack, front pocket. We've got walls, solid steel. You'd be safe. You'd fit in."

Beth barks out a laugh.

"There's only one resource that matters anymore. The people...."

Aaron is still talking when Rick knocks him out.

Michonne is hissing at Rick, less than happy with the current outcome. But after Terminous, and Grady, and everything else Beth feels that Rick is right to be paranoid. They toss his pack, go through his things, and have Aaron tied to a post before he comes back around. He's got a flare gun, and Rick wants to know how many of them there are.

"Does it matter what I tell you? Because I'm pretty sure no matter what number I tell you you're not going to trust me."

Beth plays with her knife absentmindedly while he keeps on speaking.

Carl is standing next to her with Judith in his arms, the baby leaning over to grab at Beth's dirty blonde strands. . Carol is still going through Aaron's pack, and smiles when she finds something she hasn't seen in a while.

"Here, Beth," she calls out, tossing something over, "Juju will probably like this."

Beth catches what is thrown to her on instinct, her fingers closing around something small and hard. Her hand flexes open and her breath catches in her throat. The air felt thick, and her chest tighten as if an invisible weight press down on her. She takes a deep breath, trying to steady herself, but the memories claw at the edges of her mind. The taste of fear floods her mouth, and she drops the lollipop as if it burned her. Images from that night flashed before her eyes, the laughter, the sickly sweet scent, the feeling of powerlessness. She clutches her chest, gasping for air.

"Beth?"



She can't respond, her eyes unfocused, unseeing. She's not there anymore, she's someplace else. Someplace that smelled like antiseptic and sweat, someplace that looked like a girl tied down and an arm sawed off, a broken glass jar, and the sound of the walking dead.

"Sunshine?"

"Lil' Girl, look here, yer scarin' me!"

Her heart is racing, her breath coming out in gasps now, rapid and erratic. She can't see it, but Carl is backing away from her and Judith is crying in her arms. She's hot and cold all at once, her nerves are on fire and the walls of the barn are closing in. In front of her swim the heads of her family members, one at a time. Someone tries to shake her shoulder and she lets out a scream that scares them all off.

Something cracks across her face and her head snaps back.

"Fucking wake up, Beth!" For one brief moment, her eyes focus enough to see Noah swimming in front of her. "We're out, you hear me?" She's still shaking, and he lightly slaps her again, "Beth, we're not there anymore! We're not! He's dead, you killed him, and we're not there anymore. We're not there anymore Beth!"

And then it's over, and she's back in her own body. She's still shaking like a leaf, her breath is still coming out in gaps, but she's back, and she's awake, and she can't stop herself from falling to the ground and throwing up what little food was sitting in her stomach. When she's finally done and there really is nothing left in her system, she heaves herself back to her feet. It's more than a little terrifying to see her family throw themselves back from her once she's standing, but she doesn't have time to think about them. She looks on the ground, finds what she's looking for, and kicks it over to where Aaron is tied up.

"Just how long were you watching us, huh?" she demands, "How fucking long? The hospital? Before? HOW FUCKING LONG?"

He doesn't answer her, not in the way she wants to be answered. There's stuttering, and confusion, and then Daryl and Noah have to pull her backwards to prevent her from stabbing him. She's feral and thrashing, a wild look in her eyes that's never been there before. It's a few moments before she's herself again.

"People aren't resources," she bites out, "People are people, good or bad. Maybe there are some good people left out there, but the rest are fucked, because they're bad, and life is bullshit. Maybe that," she pointed to the lollipop, "Wasn't what I think it is, maybe it's just something you had, but you're over here calling people a 'resource' and it reminds me of somebody else who was really not good." she crouches down to his level, shrugging off Noah and Daryl's hands as they do so, "So when you say people are resources, what do you mean? Are we slaves, breeders, a hole for you to use?"

Aaron looks sicker and sicker with each word that comes out of her mouth. That gives her a little bit of hope because someone bad doesn't look like that when you talk about sick shit. Beth looks him dead in the eye.

"How many walkers have you killed?"

He tells her some bullshit number that shows just how sheltered he is.

"How many people have you killed?"

"Two."

"Why?"

"Because they were going to kill me."

She nods, satisfied with the answer. "How many with you, right now?"

"One?"

She sees his pulse jump when he says it. That's what she was looking for.

"Whatever we decide, whatever we do, this is what I want you to know. If you're lying to us, if you're using us, it won't be you that I kill. It will be them. Slowly. Painfully. In front of you. You understand?"

His pale face turns even paler, and she knows he understands.

Beth looks up at Rick. "Four walls, a roof, and some food sound good. But this doesn't get to be your call on your own." She looks around at her family, all of them staring at her as if she's some stranger, and maybe she is. "This has to be our decision."

"And what if they're like Grady?" Noah wants to know.

Beth gives him a feral grin, "That won't be a problem."

## Chapter 30

Silence follows her words. No one moves. Not Rick, not Daryl, not even Merle. The barn feels like it's holding its breath.

Carl shifts his weight slightly, still clutching Judith in his arms. The baby squirms, one tiny hand reaching up to pat at Carl's chin, but her wide eyes stay locked on her mother. Beth doesn't notice the tears forming in her daughter's eyes—not right away. She's still standing with her legs braced apart, breathing hard, knife clenched tight in her fist like her body hasn't quite caught up to the fact that the threat, for now, is neutralized. Her knuckles are white, trembling just barely. Not from fear, not anymore. From restraint.

Noah clears his throat, stepping into the stillness. His voice is quiet but firm.

“We vote?”

Rick turns his head slowly, eyes scanning every face around him. Then he gives a small nod. “Yeah.”

Carol is the first to speak. Her voice doesn't waver. “If he's lying, we'll know.” She glances down at Judith, then at Beth. “We always know. Eventually.”

Daryl shifts beside Beth, his crossbow slung low but still within easy reach. He doesn't look at Aaron, doesn't look at Rick—he looks only at Beth.

“If it's real...” His voice is low and gravelly. “Might be worth the risk.”

Beth nods slowly, the movement deliberate. She hasn't taken her eyes off Aaron, but Daryl's voice grounds her. Pulls her back to the moment.

Merle lets out a harsh breath and mutters, “Y'all act like this ain't the end of the damn world. If someone's got a place worth stayin' in, we go look. Worst case, we leave it in flames like all the others.”

Glenn flinches slightly, and Maggie rests a hand on his arm.

Beth crosses her arms tightly, finally lowering her blade. Her voice is steady again, ice over fire. “But we go smart. Armed. Together. And no one,” she adds pointedly, sweeping her gaze over Rick, “makes a decision alone this time.”

Aaron shifts on his knees, spine straightening even with his wrists still bound. His mouth is bloodied, jaw tight, but his eyes are sharp and exhausted.

“You'll see I'm telling the truth,” he says quietly. “We just want good people.”

Beth narrows her eyes. “So did Grady.”

The words hang like a noose in the air. Everyone flinches at the name—except Rick. His jaw twitches, but his face stays impassive. And when he steps forward, the barnwood creaks beneath his boot.

He doesn't look at Aaron. He looks at the people he calls his family.

"We leave at first light," Rick says. "But we do it our way."

Behind her, Judith begins to fuss quietly in Carl's arms. Beth walks over, takes her gently, presses a kiss to her temple. Judith still stares at her like she's trying to figure out who this woman is—this mother with a knife and a fire behind her eyes.

Beth rocks her back and forth, murmuring softly. "It's alright, baby. Mama's got you."

Aaron's voice breaks the moment, barely above a whisper. "Thank you."

Beth doesn't even glance at him. "Don't thank me yet."

Beth kneels slowly, her legs stiff and aching from adrenaline and exhaustion. The barn floor is cold beneath her knees as she reaches down and picks up the lollipop from the dirt. Her fingers close around the glossy wrapper, now torn and coated in dust, the cheerful swirl of color still obscenely bright despite everything.

It's just sugar and dye. Just a stupid piece of candy. But the weight of it in her hand feels like a loaded gun.

She rises without a word, walks out through the barn doors and into the chill of early evening. The firepit still smolders just beyond the trees. The wood crackles low, devouring what little remains of the dried kindling they'd managed to scavenge earlier in the day.

Beth steps to the edge of the pit. Her arm moves before her mind fully catches up, and she tosses the lollipop into the flames.

It lands with a soft thunk.

The plastic wrinkles and shrivels in seconds, and the sugar inside begins to melt slow and sweet—boiling, blackening, liquefying. The flames lick it clean, curling around the memory like they want to eat it alive. She watches it burn until all that's left is a sticky trail of ash bubbling into nothing.

Behind her, the barn settles into uneasy sleep. Low murmurs fade. Weapons get tucked under blankets. Sighs, shuffling, silence. Her people—their people—trying to believe in the promise of safety one more time.

Beth wraps her arms around herself, unsure what she's trying to hold in or hold together.

A quiet scuff of boots crunches the earth behind her, and then Daryl is there. He doesn't say anything. Doesn't ask if she's okay. Doesn't offer comfort, not the way other people do. He

just stands beside her, their shadows long and stretched across the dirt.

For a moment, neither of them move.

And then Beth reaches out—fingers brushing the back of his hand. She half expects him to pull away.

He doesn't.

He takes her hand in his calloused, scarred one, curling his fingers around hers like it's the most natural thing in the world.

Behind them, Judith lets out a soft giggle from inside the barn. The kind of giggle that's small and full of light, the sound of something innocent refusing to be broken. Beth turns slightly toward the sound, her grip tightening.

She lets her eyes flutter closed.

Hope, she thinks, is a hard thing to kill.

But even if it dies, she'll bring it back. She'll build it again with her hands, even if they shake.

Because this world hasn't taken everything from her yet.

And it never will.

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